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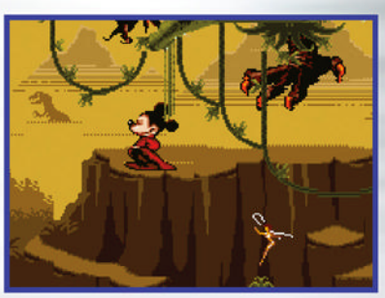

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE GAME BOY ADVANCE GAME?

DARRAN JONES

My favourite game is easily the first *Fire Emblem*. It's not only extremely strategic with great characters, it also made me fall in love with the series.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Iconoclasts*
Favourite game of all time: *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*

TIM EMPEY

The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap for me. It's a class wee game that I really enjoyed back in the day.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Dragon's Dogma 2*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

Does *Terra Galactica* count? [No – Ed] OK, *Astro Boy: Omega Factor* then. When chaotic 2D action games were terminally unfashionable on home consoles, Treasure came through with the fix I needed.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

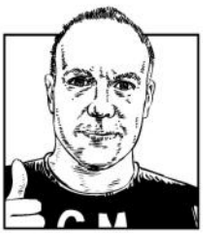
Unfortunately the only game I ever played on the GBA is the GBC version of *Mario Tennis*.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *Total War: Rome Remastered – RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

ANDREW FISHER

WarioWare, Inc: Mega Microgame$! has all that Nintendo nostalgia and clever gameplay, and I never tire of it.
Expertise: 40 years of gaming from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story*
Favourite game of all time: *Paradroid*

PAUL ROSE

WarioWare, Inc: Mega Microgame$! just because it's so rare for any game to make me laugh out loud.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Star Wars: Jedi Survivor*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*



GRAEME MASON

An unusual one, this: *Boulder Dash EX*. I love the original game and spent hours with this GBA update. It's really fun.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Half-Life 2*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

RORY MILNE

Sabre Wulf's bite-sized levels make it perfect for when you're killing time. Its collectable creatures add to the platforming fun, and fleeing from the Wulf never gets old.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

MARTYN CARROLL

My go-to GBA games are all brawlers – *Final Fight One, Double Dragon Advance* and the often-overlooked *TMNT*.
Expertise: Sinclair stuff
Currently playing: *Resident Evil 6*
Favourite game of all time: *Jet Set Willy*

LOADING...

There's no denying that Nintendo's Game Boy Advance was a powerful little console. While I was never sold on it being a portable SNES (despite its 32-bit power) it was a significant upgrade over Nintendo's Game Boy. Early games like *Final Fight One* and *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* felt incredibly impressive on the handheld, while offerings like *Astro Boy: Omega Factor* and *Gunstar Future Heroes* (both by Treasure) highlighted just how much grunt the GBA actually had. Hell, some ambitious developers even created 3D games with various degrees of success. With that in mind, it has been delightful learning about the many tricks and techniques talented developers used to get the best out of what would be the last console to carry the Game Boy name.

Outside of our excellent Game Boy Advance coverage, we've got some great anecdotes around the creation of *Fantasia*, *Slave Zero*, *SimCity 3000* and *Alpha Storm*, while Martyn Carroll and Will Freeman have created two superb Ultimate Guides about *Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge* and *DoDonPachi*. We review *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story*, chat to Atari about its plans for 2024 and discover the evolution of Codemasters' *TOCA* series.

There's plenty more to discover, including how to access ten years of digital issues of the magazine with a subscription on page 30.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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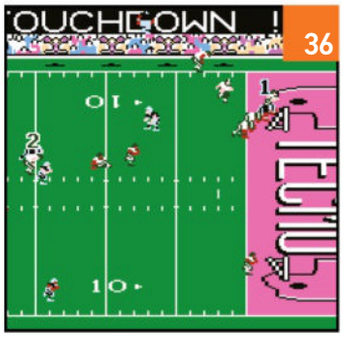

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The Story Of: Fantasia
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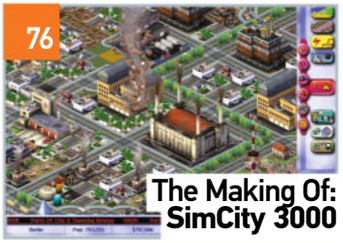
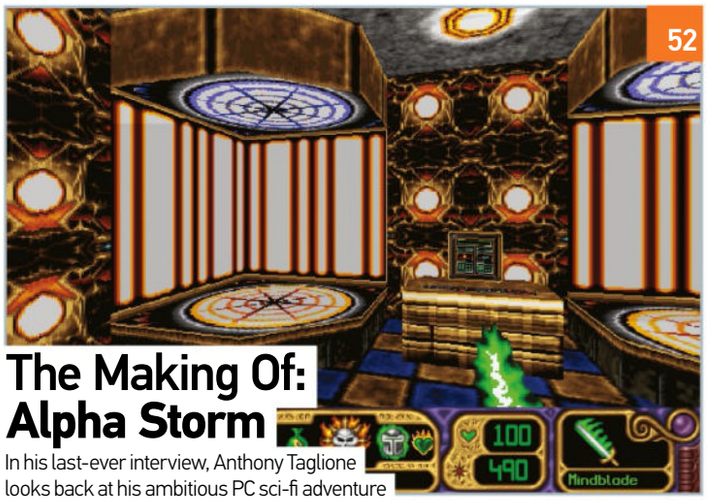
The Evolution Of: TOCA

Gavin Raeburn navigates the twists and turns of the popular racing series he worked on



The Making Of: SimCity 3000



The Making Of: Alpha Storm

In his last-ever interview, Anthony Taglione looks back at his ambitious PC sci-fi adventure

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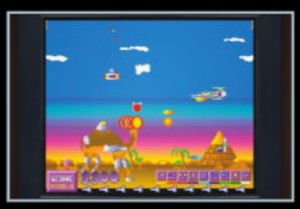

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» Here's The 400 Mini, the half-sized counterpart to Atari's classic 8-bit computer.

ATARI ADVANCES

What's in store from Atari over the coming months?

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Danny Gallagher chats to Willis Gibson about his sensational *Tetris* abilities

14 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
Nick crosses another time rift and finds himself in September 2007

Atari isn't a brand that has always had the best custodians, and that has left some players with a lingering scepticism when it comes to the company. However, recent years have seen Atari rebuilding its reputation in the retro space, thanks to the likes of the Atari 2600+, *Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration* and the exciting *Recharged* games that put new spins on old favourites. With that in mind, we recently met with the company to see what it has in store for the near future, as well as to get some clarity on some aspects of what Atari is doing today.

"Our goal is not trying to be Nintendo or Sony, or some of the other publishing brands – it's to focus where we can really excel, and it's in retro," says David Lowey of Atari, and the company has recently marked two 25th anniversaries. The Atari-owned online game database MobyGames hit the quarter century mark at the beginning of March, and *Rollercoaster Tycoon* reached its anniversary at the end of the month. To celebrate, the publisher has just released a new line of *Rollercoaster Tycoon* merchandise, as well as interviews with series creator Chris Sawyer.

» [The 400 Mini] It was hard to tear ourselves away from *Berzerk* to do proper work.

» [The 400 Mini] Homebrew favourite *Yoomp!* is one of the games included alongside the Eighties classics.

The most exciting forthcoming product was The 400 Mini, which we were able to play for the first time. This new mini console has been developed by Retro Games Ltd, the company behind the mini versions of the Amiga 500 and Commodore 64. If you're familiar with those, you'll know what to expect – this unit is a half-sized version of the Atari 400 from 1979, and can play games from across the Atari 8-bit computer range, as well as the closely related Atari 5200. It has 25 built-in games and the ability to add your own games via USB, and offers solid emulation, a clean user interface and HDMI output. The USB version of the CX40 joystick is quite clever, with function buttons hidden in the ring around the base of the joystick – something that tripped us up initially.

Why has Atari gone for the more traditional mini console route this time around, rather than opting for a full relaunch as with the Atari 2600+? David says the company has taken note of how other retro computers have been brought back to the market. "The mini form factor that Retro Games and Plaion have done historically very well, the market seemed to like that as a solution," he explains. "Also, talking about launching or relaunching a computer system – in theory it's certainly doable, but it's a much more complex product if you actually have a working keyboard and all these things. Does that mean that there might not be some sort of Atari 8-bit computer down the road? I don't know, but people would have to want it, it would have to solve a problem that exists, and it would need to be affordable."

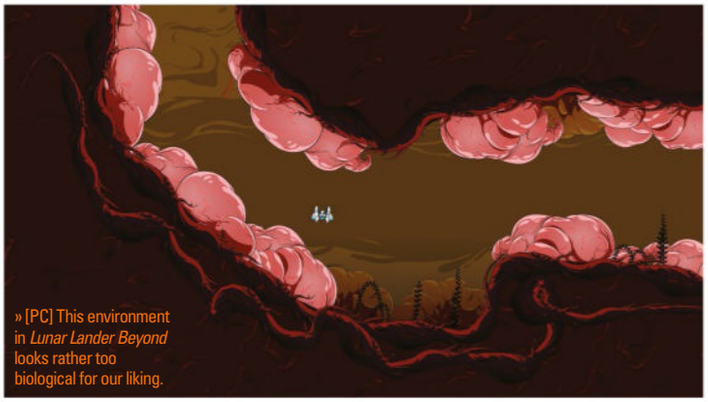
» [PC] We'd put good money on that elephant being a stress-induced hallucination.

» Though we prefer *Food Fight*, *Ninja Golf* is arguably the most famous of the returning 7800 games.

If you've picked up an Atari 2600+ and you're looking for some more games to play on it, the first set of Atari 7800 reissues is due for release on 25 May. The pick of the bunch is *Food Fight*, an arcade conversion that is one of the console's very best games, and it's joined by the cult favourite sports beat-'em-up *Ninja Golf* and the post-apocalyptic combat racer *Fatal Run*. The two-button CX78+ joypad is due to release alongside the games, allowing owners to fully enjoy Atari 7800 games. The cartridges are priced at £24.99 each and the CX78+ at £19.99, and all are exclusive to Amazon in the UK.

One bugbear with recent Atari cartridge releases has been the difficulty of getting them internationally – they've primarily been available exclusively via the Atari website, without international shipping available. David says that's changing imminently. "Now we're partnering with Plaion on manufacturing, it should solve the international distribution problem for that. We kind of took a slight pause on the XP cartridges because we wanted to get through that transition – we don't want extended preorder times and we want international shipping, and certainly you can't launch the 2600+, this whole ecosystem of cartridges, and then tell the majority of the world they can't have it."

» The new USB joystick has two function buttons on the front, in addition to the ones on the ring.



» [PC] This environment in *Lunar Lander Beyond* looks rather too biological for our liking.

Then there's the latest of Atari's line of retro-inspired games, *Lunar Lander Beyond*, a new take on the arcade classic. This retains the physics-based piloting, but adds a brand-new story, as well as four distinct ships to command and a variety of environments to explore across 30 missions. Intriguingly, stress has an effect on your pilot's perception and hallucinations are possible when their sanity starts to slip a bit too far. The game has been developed by Dreams Uncorporated, previously responsible for the visually striking RPG *Cris Tales*, and is due for release on all current formats on 23 April.

We'll keep you updated on these projects as they arrive – The 400 Mini just missed our deadline for this issue, so expect a full review of that next month.

IN MEMORY OF AKIRA TORIYAMA

The world renowned manga author Akira Toriyama passed away on 1 March, at the age of 68. After first rising to fame with the manga *Dr Slump* in the early Eighties, Toriyama began *Dragon Ball* in 1984 – an enormous, internationally popular franchise consisting of manga, anime, toys and more, including dozens of videogames. Toriyama would also work directly in videogames, most notably in RPGs. He contributed character designs to the original *Dragon Quest* in 1986, and remained involved with the series throughout his lifetime. He then proceeded to design original characters for *Dragon Ball* games and games related to *Weekly Shonen Jump*, the publication which serialised his manga, before providing the character designs for the classic SNES game *Chrono Trigger*. Later on, Toriyama's work would appear in the two *Tobal* games and the *Blue Dragon* series, and some of his final works will appear in the forthcoming *Dragon Quest XII*. Toriyama leaves a huge cultural legacy, with countless artists and game developers citing his works as an inspiration, and our thoughts are with his family and friends.

» [Game Boy Advance] *Dragon Ball* fans have argued that Goku should appear in the *Super Smash Bros* series.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

You're a Bad Influence

I recently finished the TV series *The Curse.* A drama by the usually brilliant Nathan Fielder. This was not brilliant. It was utter guff. Boring episodes and an ending that made me so angry I texted a group of friends with the most expletive-laden WhatsApp you've ever seen. As a result of this I have decided to NEVER watch a TV series again. I just can't take the risk.

But how to fill the void? YouTube. I've been enjoying a lot of YouTube. And it's mainly retro gaming. It's generally wonderful, heartfelt stuff. Except the American YouTubers. They are so angry and there's always beef with other YouTubers.

I've moved on from people recapping and cleaning Amiga cases with a toothbrush and instead watch old gaming TV shows. I got into this via RoseTintedSpectrum. He's done commentary over all four seasons of (Breaking) *Bad Influence* and it's absolutely hilarious. Check it out (although it's NSFW, as all the best things are).

If you don't remember *Bad Influence*, it's a videogame show for kids hosted in the most part by Andy Crane and Violet Berlin and is a brilliant time capsule of the mid-Nineties. There's a lot of talk of the Watara Supervision, a handheld I had never heard of. Andy genuinely believes this is a legit competitor that could destroy the Game Boy. Spoiler, it wasn't and it looks absolutely awful.

My favourite bits are in the later shows when the internet is just beginning to take off. Andy is so not impressed and calls it "boring" and refers to anyone who uses it as "spotty geeks". It's absolutely wild. Pretty much every week he is backing the wrong horse – he raves about the Saturn and completely disses the PlayStation because it only comes with a demo disc, not an actual game.

As someone who hosted a show about gaming, *Thumb Bandits* for those unsure, I'm aware these things are incredibly dated, and I know if I looked back on my efforts I'd be mortified. One wrong call from me was slagging *Max Payne*. I just didn't get it, but more importantly I thought I had to be arch and mean. I did come from the *11 O'Clock Show* for goodness sake! Snark was all I knew. I now of course recognise it as being an incredibly beautiful and important game. A few days after it aired, I got called into the office because the publishers of *Max Payne* were furious I had said it was rubbish and they were threatening to never send another game for review. Other companies started doing the same. It got so bad that I was FORCED to talk about some absolutely awful wrestling game and say how good it was, when it was clearly a lump of the old proverbial.

It's fun watching these old shows (you've all seen the clip from the BBC where sending an email is explained in a ten-minute clip, right?) but it don't half make me feel old. And then I remember I am old. And cry. And watch another episode of *Bad Influence* to try and pretend I'm 20 again, and not a doddering 50 year old who gets out of breath climbing the stairs. ✱

> "One wrong call from me was slagging Max Payne. I just didn't get it"

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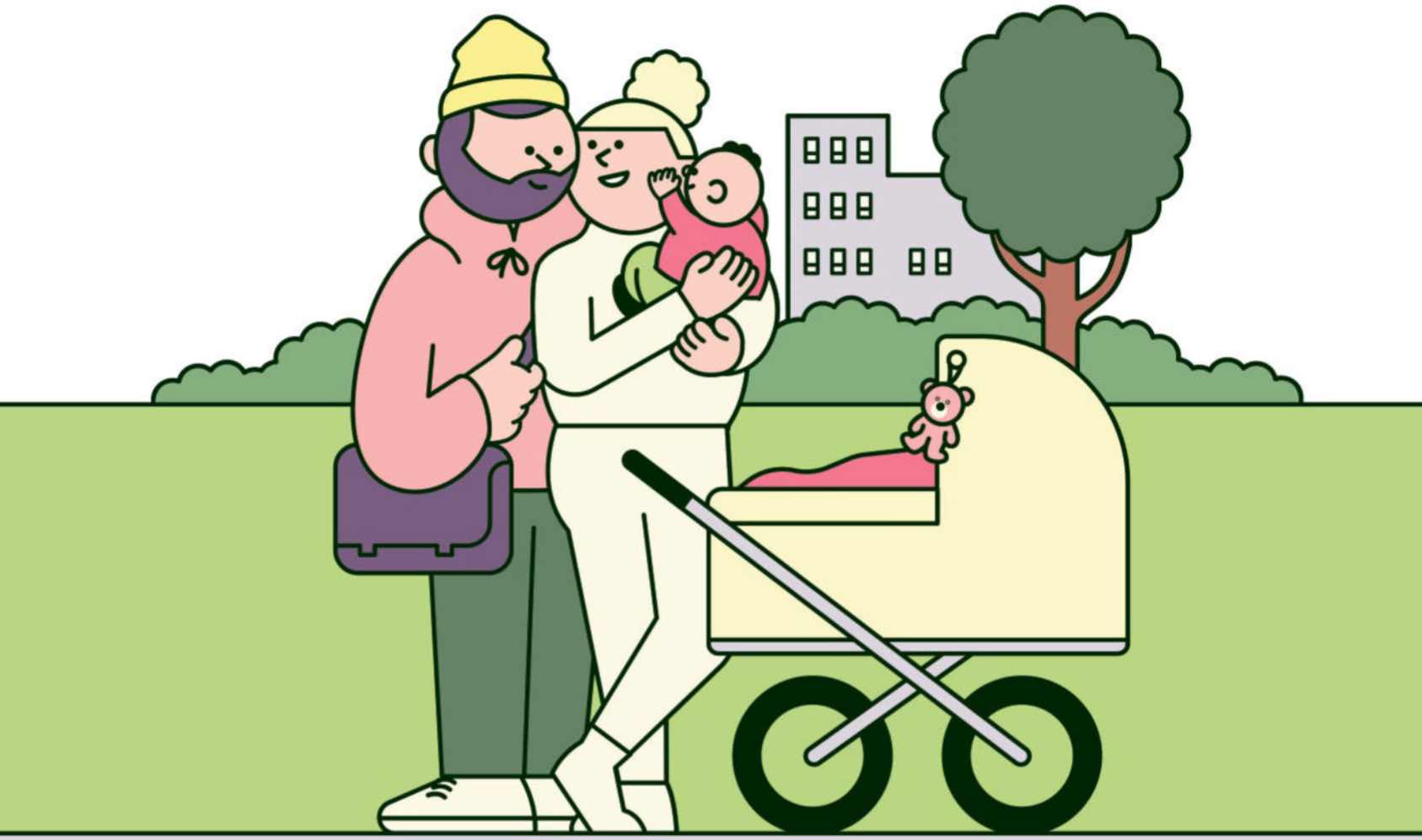

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

A battle of minds

My wife Sanja isn't, by any stretch of the imagination, a gamer. At most she's one of those dirty casuals – she'll play *Animal Crossing*, and once had a brief obsession with *Pokémon* (which she had to go cold turkey on, because it became all-consuming). Growing up in Australia, there was a NES in their house – and she remembers playing *Duck Tales* – but for the most part she has no familiarity with any of the games I was raised on.

As a sort of experiment, I've recently been introducing her to some of those games I grew up with. We're not playing two-player as such, but playing single-player games together – *The Hobbit*, *Rock Star Ate My Hamster* and others. It's fascinating for me to watch her discovering them for the first time, warts and all (for the record, *The Hobbit* she found profoundly frustrating, but she got way, way into *Rock Star*...).

I've written before about how maddening I can find my formative games when I go back to them now. However, on this recent run of playthroughs, I realised something I haven't noticed before; that there is a game within all those old games. A sort of meta-game, a battle of minds almost. I thought I was showing Sanja some ancient single-player games, but as I did it was clear there was always somebody else in the room – the ghost of someone from decades past – playing their own game with us.

It's different now, with games being created by huge teams, to tick boxes that'll satisfy the accountants. With old games being authored by one or two people, they were essentially a war between the player and the creator.

In *The Hobbit*, for example, it's less about trying to follow the story of the book it's based upon than it is about trying to get inside the head of creator Veronika Megler. It's so authored – and not by JRR Tolkien – that you can almost feel Megler watching over your shoulder with a wry smile on her face as she watches you get killed over and over and over.

See also *Manic Miner* – a game I recently had the pleasure of almost completing, for the very first time (before giving up, exasperated, naturally, a few screens from the end). Both *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy* are almost profoundly authored by Matthew Smith – his unique humour displayed throughout – but they are so quirky and esoteric there's no way they'd have made it past a modern committee. You sense Smith's hand in every challenging jump, and can almost hear him chuckling to himself as he watches you try to time the rope swing in the Cold Store room.

I've always considered that most of the games I grew up playing were single-player, but I now realise they're nothing of the sort: the enemies in *Horace And The Spiders* aren't the spiders – it's William Tang. In *Super Mario Bros* the ultimate boss isn't King Koopa – it's Shigeru Miyamoto. In the *King's Quest* series you're actually on a quest to solve the riddle of Roberta Williams.

It's like stumbling into a tomb and trying to decipher a puzzle laid down centuries ago. ★

> "With old games being authored by one or two people, they were essentially a war between the player and the creator"

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» Willis Gibson celebrated his 14th birthday playing *Tetris 1991*, Immersive Gearbox's new interactive game in The Colony, Texas.

Photo credits: Danny Gallagher, @bluescuti1771 (Twitch), @ClassicTetris (YouTube)

"Once I started playing it, I really started enjoying its simplicity. It's really easy to begin with but it's super hard to master"
WILLIS GIBSON

Willis Gibson

Danny Gallagher chats to the king of Tetris

For almost 40 years, *Tetris* has remained unbeaten. Then on 21 December 2023, Willis Gibson of Stillwater, Oklahoma, known on Twitch and to *Tetris* World Championship fans as @bluescuti, became the first person to break the NES game after just 40 minutes. Overnight, the whole world learned his name and his impressive accomplishment. We caught up with him and his mother Karin at his 14th birthday party at Immersive Gamebox in The Colony, Texas.

What's life been like since you broke the game?
Willis: Lots of interviews. My mom is getting flooded with calls.
Karin: For a while there, I couldn't keep up with all of them.

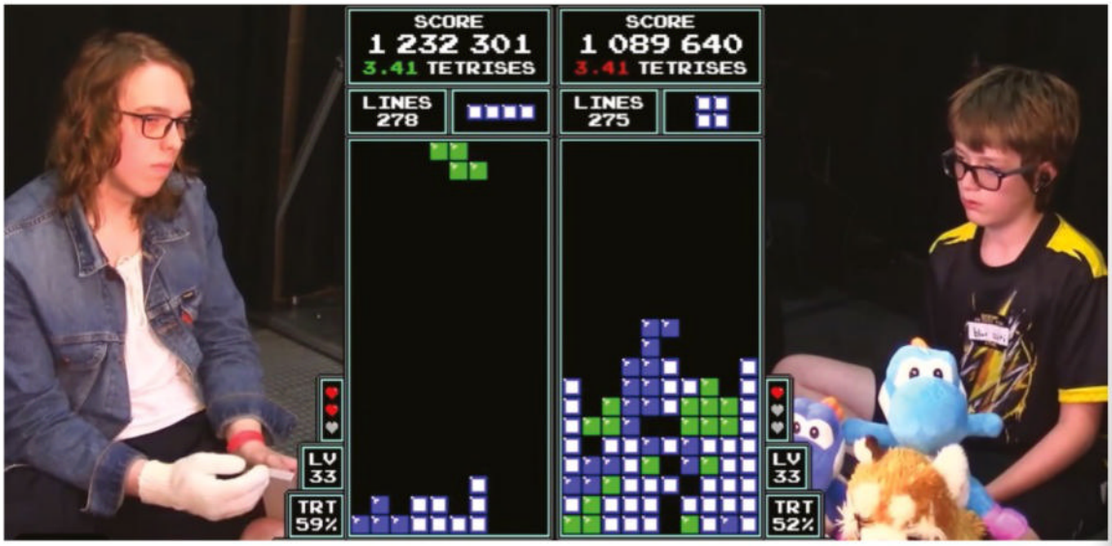
How long have you been playing *Tetris* and when did you get good at it, or have you always been good at it?
Willis: I started in August 2021, but I didn't get to the high-level tournaments until mid-2023, so probably about two years of playing the lower run of tournaments. I just stuck with it since then. The first time I made the Masters Event, which is the highest tournament every month, I think I made that in September 2023. So it took me over two years to get to the top, I guess.

How did you get into *Tetris*?
Willis: I met a guy named GameScout. I found his videos on YouTube and I was like, This is cool'. Once I started playing it, I really started enjoying its simplicity. It's really easy to begin with, but it's super hard to master.

Did you set out to get a kill screen or did you even know if it was possible?
Willis: People have figured it out because of AI and people can do what's called a TAS [tool-assisted speedrun]. Basically they go frame by frame and they manually input the inputs so people crash the game doing those but no human had actually done it. I guess how I started going forward is two days before I got the world record, I was just not going for a crash at all and I was 18 lines away. That

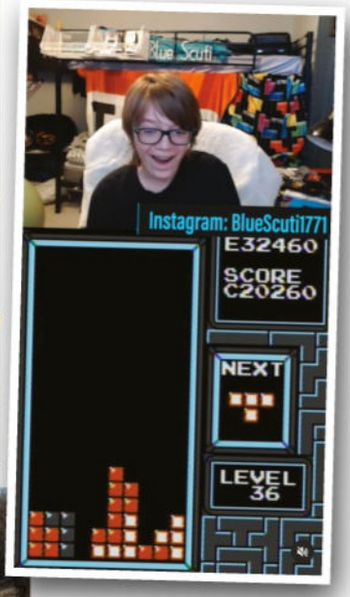
» Willis signs an autograph for a young fan named Jameson Febbroriello at the Immersive Gamebox event.

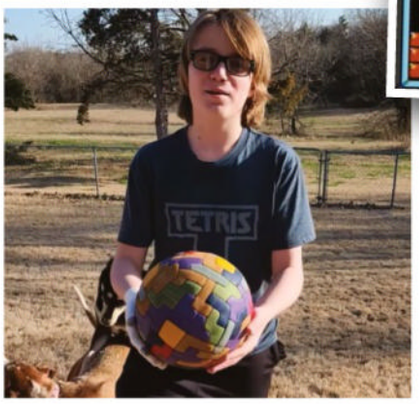
» Camera crews from local news stations as well as a bunch of friends and fans helped Willis celebrate his 14th birthday.



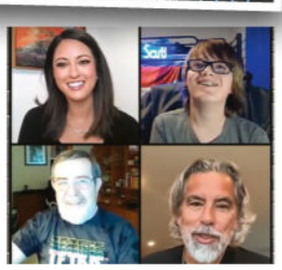
» Willis, right, competed in the Classic World *Tetris* Championship in 2023 where he made it all the way to the semifinals before Eve 'Sidnev' Commandeur, left, ended his run.

» Willis plays another round of *Tetris* for his fans on his Instagram page.





» Willis shows off the cool *Tetris* soccer ball he got from Jon-Paul Wheatley @jonpaulsballs.



» Here's Willis being surprised by *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov (bottom left) and Henk Rogers (bottom right) the cofounder of The Tetris Company.

same day, another player called Fractal [Justin Yu] started going for it and he took my record the next day. So I said, "OK, I'm gonna get it back," and the next day, I crashed the game.

When you broke it, how did you feel? What was going through your head?

Willis: Mainly shock. I guess because there's one spot where the game can 100% of the time crash and I missed that. So I guess my reaction instead of being like I hit my goal was more shocked that I did it because I didn't even know the game could even crash at that point.

Didn't the video get taken down?

Willis: Twitch has this rule of let's say you start this account when you're 12 and you turn 13. Well you started the account when you're 12, so you're banned.
Karin: Someone actually reported it the day after he had started this account when he was 12 but we did get it back. I had to sign a lot of paperwork. A YouTuber named Ludwig [Ahgren] actually helped out quite a bit.

You got to meet *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov and Henk Rogers. How did that happen?

Willis: It was on NBC like on a Zoom call and I had no idea when we started the interview. All of a sudden, they turned on their cameras and I was like, "Oh I didn't know you guys were going to be here." It was really cool.

How did Alexi Pajitnov react to *Tetris* being broke?

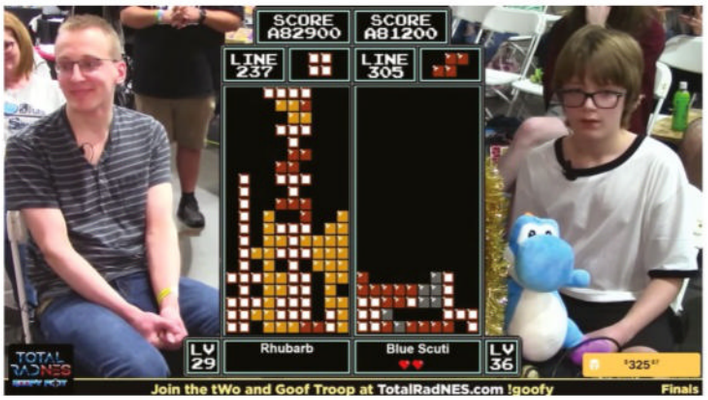
Karin: He reacted as in congratulations on breaking the game but it wasn't his game. He didn't develop it. Nintendo did so he goes, "My game wasn't broken." It was very funny.

How do you keep up with the speed towards the end of the run?

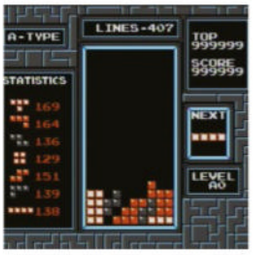
Willis: Lining out, staying as low to the bottom as you can. That's the main strategy for high scores. You're trying to stay as low as you can because the higher up you are, the more dangerous it is. For the leaderboard, you can't pause or take breaks. For me, your hands are moving a lot while playing so I guess my hands don't lock up towards the end of the run. Your hands tend to get pretty sweaty because you're playing for 40 minutes. [Laughs] So sometimes your hand slips and that can end a run.

Is there a point in the future where you'll stop chasing records or do you think you'll always be competing?

Willis: If I ever get burnt out or anything, I'll probably just take a break from the games but I've had fun and I like trying to go for those records. So for the foreseeable future I'll keep going for them.



» Willis, right, won the regional finals against a series of *Tetris* masters like Rhubarb, left, who finished second in January of 2024.



BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

SEPTEMBER 2007 – Microsoft breaks out the chequebook, RPG fans have plenty to choose from, Link is back in action and one first-person shooter receives a rapturous reception. Nick Thorpe has the DeLorean, and there are plenty of seats for all of you

» [PC] People say politics and videogames don't mix. Those people evidently never played *Bioshock*.

NEWS SEPTEMBER 2007

On 14 September, British bank Northern Rock was granted a liquidity support facility by the Bank Of England. The bank had attempted to raise cash in August by selling its loan books, but investor demand had collapsed due to the subprime mortgage crisis. The news of this intervention caused the first run on a British bank in 150 years as depositors sought to protect their cash, and ultimately resulted in the nationalisation of the bank in 2008.

Rally driver Colin McRae, his five-year-old son Johnny, six-year-old Ben Porcelli and family friend Graeme Duncan all died in a helicopter crash near Lanark, Scotland on 15 September. In 2011, an enquiry found that McRae had been flying with an expired licence and had been at fault for the crash, having entered the "difficult terrain" of the Mouse Valley "lacking the necessary training, experience or requirement to do so".

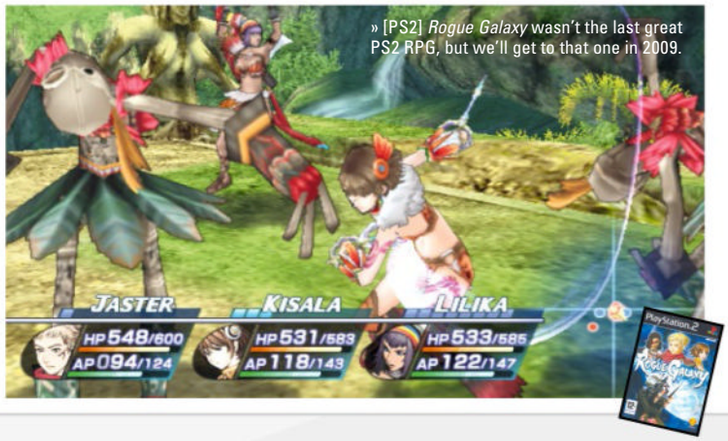
Sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* first aired on CBS on 24 September. The show followed the misadventures of physicists Leonard and Sheldon, their colleagues Howard and Raj and their neighbour Penny. The show achieved huge success, running for 12 seasons and spawning the spin-off *Young Sheldon*.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM SEPTEMBER 2007

After mounting pressure from customers and the press over Xbox 360 hardware failure rates, Microsoft finally announced that warranty cover for all machines would be extended to three years from the date of purchase, effectively covering every console since the 2005 launch. According to *Edge*, Microsoft's estimate of the cost of this scheme was "between $1.05bn and $1.15bn". *Edge* also reported that a new chipset codenamed Falcon "should increase airflow and reduce heat within future machines, also halving the cost of the manufacturing process".

Those fortunate enough to have a working Xbox 360 console, or a sufficiently beefy PC, could enjoy a stone-cold classic – the first-person shooter *Bioshock*. This spiritual successor to the *System Shock* games saw players explore Rapture, an underwater city gone catastrophically wrong. *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* felt it "manages to be both a tricky, exciting action game, a fascinating creation of an enclosed world and a deep inquiry about what it means to be human", and scored it 10/10. "It might not be as flawless as *Half-Life 2*, but it bites off so much more and accomplishes it all magnificently," said *PC Gamer*, giving it 95%. *X360* also gave it 10/10, saying, "We can still hear the groans of the Big Daddy, the pitiful cries of the Little Sisters, the insane ranting of the Splicers and Andrew Ryan's ominous rhetoric in the quieter moments of our day."

Beyond that, the notable 360 games of the month were mostly retro hits on Xbox Live Arcade – *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* (8/10 *OXM*, 3/5 *360*), *Sensible World Of Soccer* (4/5 *360*) and *Sonic The Hedgehog* (8/10 *OXM*). If RPGs were more your speed, *Blue Dragon* boasted the involvement of key *Final Fantasy* series staff but divided opinion. *Edge* gave it 6/10, claiming that, "Dialogue is stilted and unnatural and the lines and morals are trotted out without subtlety, shade or even personality." By contrast, *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* praised it for having "a deep script" with



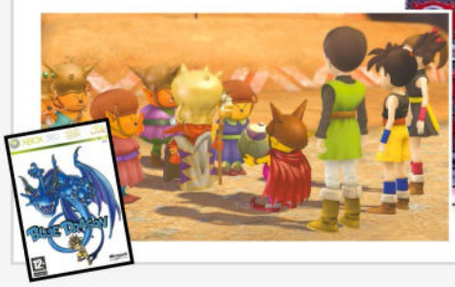
» [PS2] *Rogue Galaxy* wasn't the last great PS2 RPG, but we'll get to that one in 2009.

"superb translation" and gave it 9/10. Other scores included 3/5 from *360* and 7/10 from *X360*.

Fortunately, the venerable PS2 had the RPG goods this month. *Play* felt that *Rogue Galaxy* might be "the last great RPG on PS2," scoring it 90% as it "rarely gets dull due to the characterisation and brilliant fighting system". *Official PlayStation Magazine* wasn't as enamoured, noting "irritating invisible walls" and a "horrible equipment menu" in its 7/10 review. *Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria* earned 8/10 from *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine*, which felt that the battles become "pure joy" once the player overcomes the "convoluted character development system and the unwelcoming battle mechanics".

Over on the Nintendo side of things, the Wii version of EA's karaoke and dance game *Boogie* scored 81% in *Official Nintendo Magazine* and 8.1/10 in *nRevolution*, with the former saying, "You'll be booting it up again and again for a 30-minute blast with your mates." The DS adaptation of the PC real-time strategy game *Anno 1701* earned 8.5/10 in *nRevolution*, which felt that it "captures the essence of the full-blown strategy games" and that the touchscreen controls were "superb".

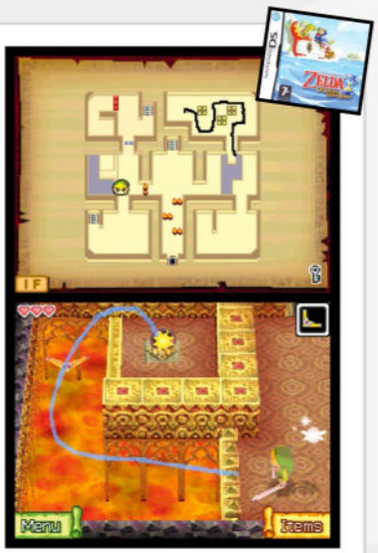
» [Xbox 360] Hironobu Sakaguchi, Nobuo Uematsu and Akira Toriyama all worked on *Blue Dragon*.



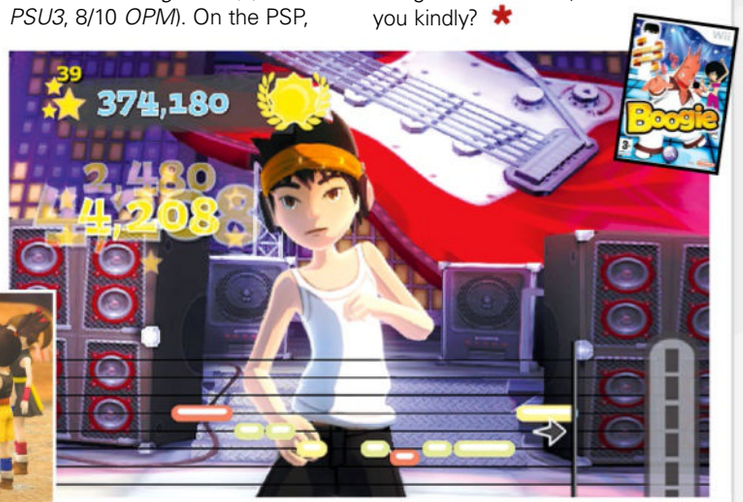
However, the big Nintendo game for the month was the Japanese import release of *The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass*, a sequel to *Wind Waker* that offered top-down adventuring with plenty of DS-specific features. *Edge* singled out the dungeons for praise in a 9/10 review, saying, "Only the last is a major challenge, but all are rich in devious and delightful ideas that exploit *Phantom Hourglass*' new interactions to the full and without repetition." In another 9/10 review, *games™* elaborated on some of those interactions, noting that, "Blowing into the microphone will, at several points, reap significant rewards while closing the DS and reopening it is another technique available here."

And what of the other formats? The best PC exclusives were expansion packs, *Civilization IV: Beyond The Sword* (74% *PC Gamer*, 8/10 *games™*) and *Medieval II Total War: Kingdoms* (90% *PC Gamer*). The PS3 got a port of *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2* (8/10 *PSU3*, 8/10 *OPM*). On the PSP, *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* got 8/10 from Official PS2 for having "tons to do, and immaculate attention to detail".

We're sure plenty of exciting games will arrive as the holiday season approaches, so join us again next month, would you kindly? ✱



» [DS] Even with the game yet to be translated, the *Zelda* series' DS debut was well received.



» [Wii] Singing? Dancing? *Boogie* appears to be a manifestation of Nick's nightmares.

CHARTS

SEPTEMBER 2007

XBOX 360

1 – **The Darkness** (2K Games)
2 – **Forza Motorsport 2** (Microsoft)
3 – **Colin McRae: Dirt** (Codemasters)
4 – **Overlord** (Codemasters)
5 – **Flatout: Ultimate Carnage** (Empire)

PLAYSTATION 3

1 – **Resistance: Fall Of Man** (Sony)
2 – **MotorStorm** (Sony)
3 – **Fantastic 4: Rise Of The Silver Surfer** (2K Games)
4 – **The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** (Ubisoft)
5 – **Virtua Tennis 3** (Sega)

WII

1 – **Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition** (Capcom)
2 – **Wii Play** (Nintendo)
3 – **Harry Potter And The Order Of The Phoenix** (EA)
4 – **Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07** (EA)
5 – **The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess** (Nintendo)

MUSIC

1 – **Beautiful Girls** (Sean Kingston)
2 – **Hey There Delilah** (Plain White T's)
3 – **Stronger** (Kanye West)
4 – **1973** (James Blunt)
5 – **Sexy No No No** (Girls Aloud)

THIS MONTH IN...

Official PlayStation Magazine

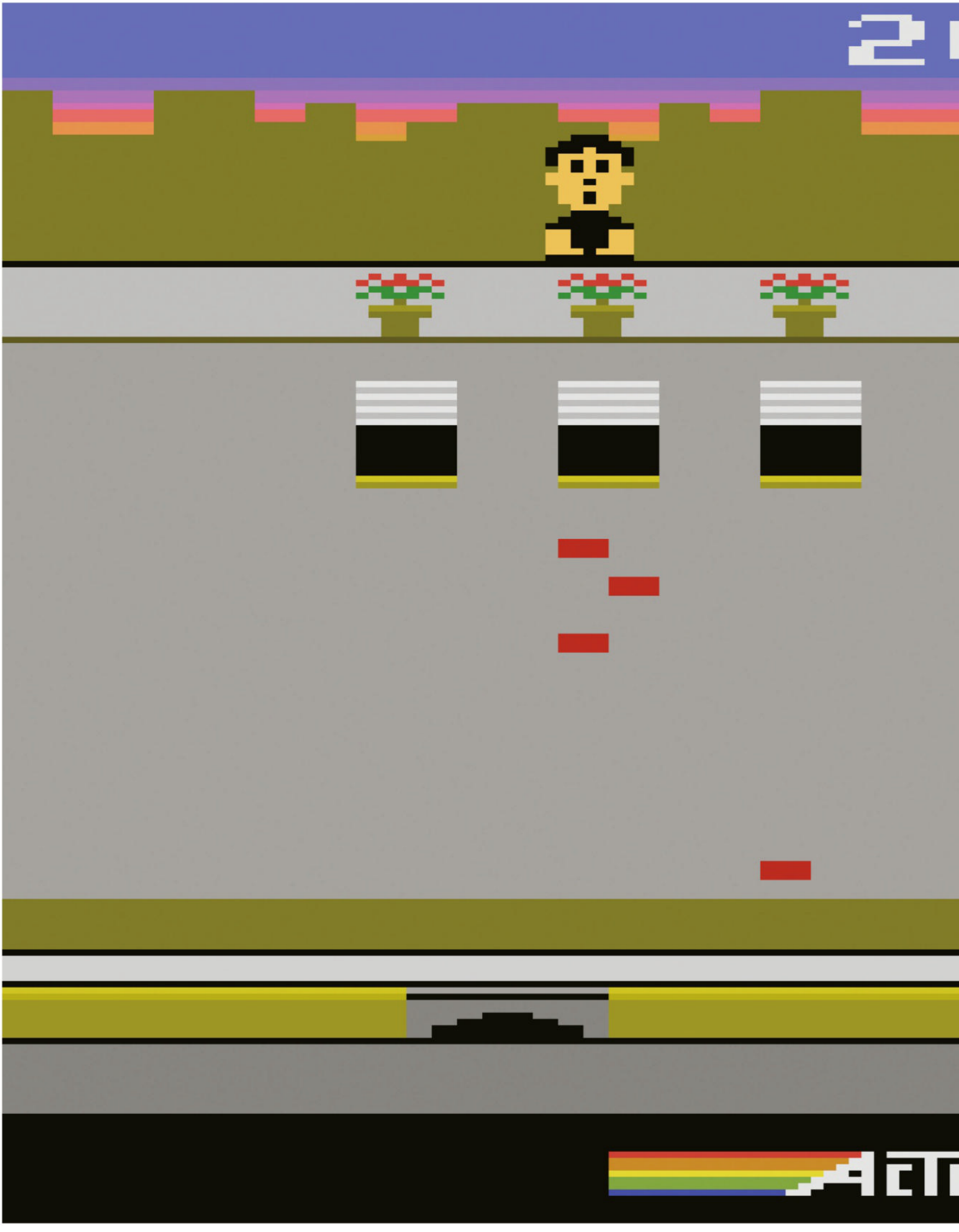
"The harsh truth is that *Wipeout*'s time has passed; racing games have evolved too far for players to get the same rush of speed from something that's so lacking in graphical polish and finesse." The beloved hit scored just 3/10.

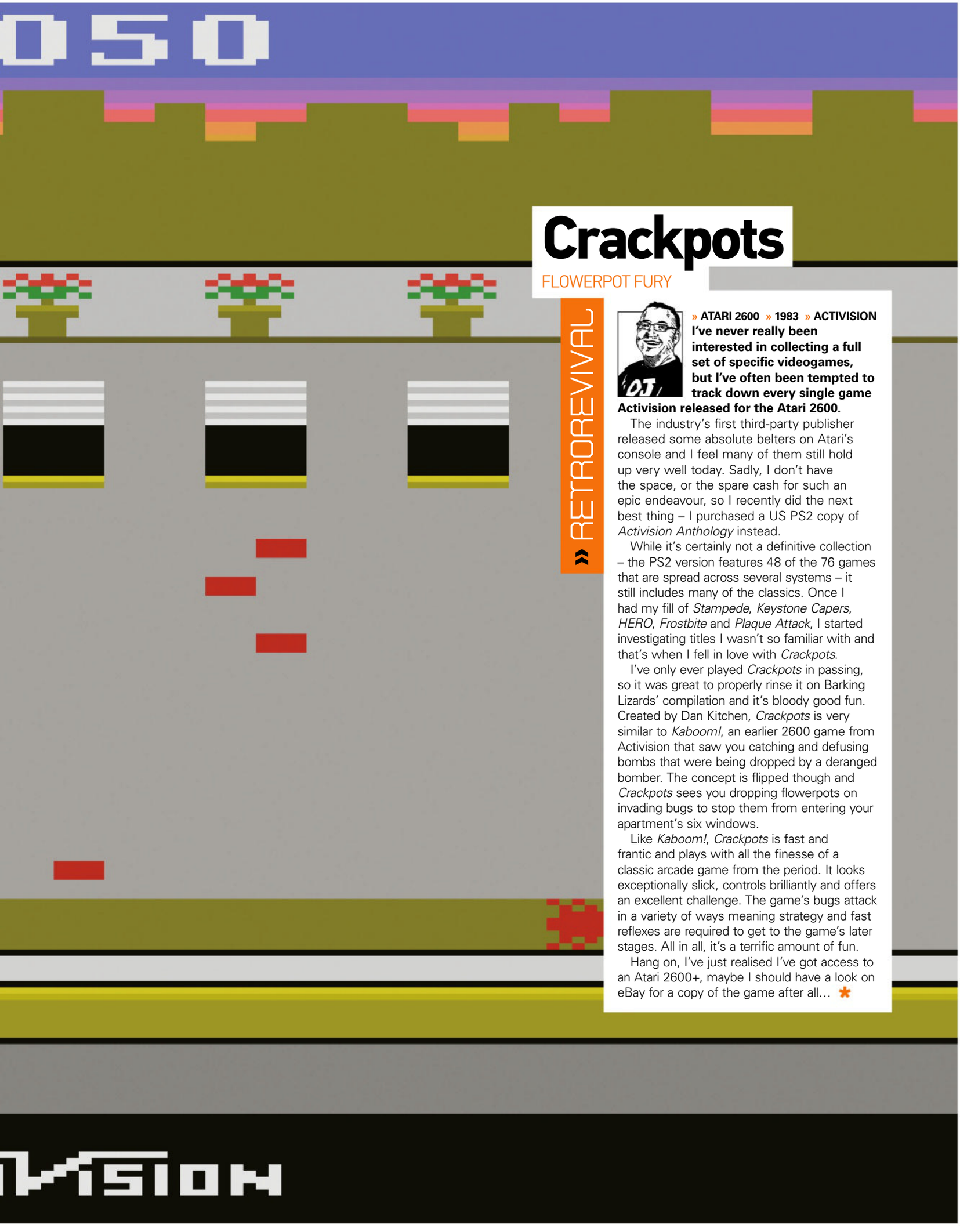
Play

"We wouldn't touch a 360 with a bargepole right now," says *Play*. "The PS3 may be expensive, but at least it works." Yeah? Try finding someone who will advise you to buy an original model PS3 now.

X360

A survey reveals that 34% of readers' Xbox 360 consoles have malfunctioned, but only 30% are red rings, with 50% reporting disc read and scratching errors. 85% of readers who used Microsoft's repair service were satisfied.





Crackpots

FLOWERPOT FURY

RETROREVIVAL

» ATARI 2600 » 1983 » ACTIVISION

I've never really been interested in collecting a full set of specific videogames, but I've often been tempted to track down every single game Activision released for the Atari 2600.

The industry's first third-party publisher released some absolute belters on Atari's console and I feel many of them still hold up very well today. Sadly, I don't have the space, or the spare cash for such an epic endeavour, so I recently did the next best thing – I purchased a US PS2 copy of *Activision Anthology* instead.

While it's certainly not a definitive collection – the PS2 version features 48 of the 76 games that are spread across several systems – it still includes many of the classics. Once I had my fill of *Stampede*, *Keystone Capers*, *HERO*, *Frostbite* and *Plaque Attack*, I started investigating titles I wasn't so familiar with and that's when I fell in love with *Crackpots*.

I've only ever played *Crackpots* in passing, so it was great to properly rinse it on Barking Lizards' compilation and it's bloody good fun. Created by Dan Kitchen, *Crackpots* is very similar to *Kaboom!*, an earlier 2600 game from Activision that saw you catching and defusing bombs that were being dropped by a deranged bomber. The concept is flipped though and *Crackpots* sees you dropping flowerpots on invading bugs to stop them from entering your apartment's six windows.

Like *Kaboom!*, *Crackpots* is fast and frantic and plays with all the finesse of a classic arcade game from the period. It looks exceptionally slick, controls brilliantly and offers an excellent challenge. The game's bugs attack in a variety of ways meaning strategy and fast reflexes are required to get to the game's later stages. All in all, it's a terrific amount of fun.

Hang on, I've just realised I've got access to an Atari 2600+, maybe I should have a look on eBay for a copy of the game after all…

INSIDE THE GAME BOY®

TO ENTER A NEW MILLENNIUM, NINTENDO NEEDED A HANDHELD THAT WAS UP TO THE JOB. WE SPEAK TO GAME BOY ADVANCE DEVELOPERS PAST AND PRESENT TO FIND OUT WHY THIS PORTABLE POWERHOUSE WAS AS MUCH FUN TO MAKE GAMES FOR AS IT WAS TO PLAY GAMES ON

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

Nintendo is a company known for marching to the beat of its own drum, and its early experiences with handheld consoles go a long way to proving the benefits of that approach. The Game Boy's four shades of grey may not have dazzled like the colour graphics of the Lynx and the Game Gear, but its affordability and the appeal of *Tetris* ensured that it comfortably outsold both. When the Game Boy Color finally arrived in 1998, it was actually comparable to the capabilities of those old rival systems, without the hefty battery bill that came with them. Nintendo could afford to move at such a glacial pace because of an absence of serious challengers in the portable console market.

That's not to say that Nintendo wasn't exploring its options, though. In early 1996, rumours of Project Atlantis made the rounds in gaming magazines – a 32-bit handheld with a colour screen measuring three inches by two inches, with four buttons. Though it sounds remarkably similar to the Game Boy Advance, this prototype ultimately never made it to market because Nintendo considered it to be too bulky and power-hungry. The Game Boy Color instead succeeded the Game Boy, and work on the Game Boy Advance began soon after. While Nintendo was still firmly in command of the global handheld console market, it couldn't necessarily afford to proceed at its previous leisurely pace due to the arrival of the WonderSwan from toy giant Bandai and SNK's Neo Geo Pocket Color.

Development of the Game Boy Advance was handled by the Nintendo Research & Engineering Department in Kyoto, with key names including mechanical designer Masahiko Oota, design manager Kenichi Sugino, hardware designers Ryuji Umeji and Shuichi Tsugawa and system programmer Takanobu Nakajima. Speaking with Nintendo's official Japanese website in 2000, Tsugawa stated that the hardware was developed in a relatively short span of around two years, with Umeji confirming that around half of that time was spent choosing a CPU. Sugino stated that the horizontal layout of the console was chosen to avoid making it too large, and that a proposed clamshell design was considered too thick.

Rumours swirled for months about the Game Boy Advance before it was officially unveiled. The December 1999 issue of *N64 Magazine* reported that the console would have a 32-bit ARM CPU, a 240x160 widescreen display, and a battery

ADVANCE

THE INTERVIEWEES

JAS AUSTIN
SEGA ARCADE GALLERY, JET RIDERS

RIK NICOL
GOODBOY GALAXY

JIM BAGLEY
SUPER DROPZONE, IK+

MATT BOZON
SHANTAE ADVANCE, SIGMA STAR SAGA

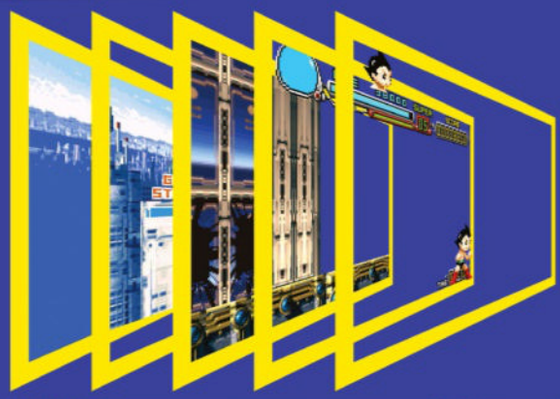
MIKE STRAGEY
SHANTAE ADVANCE, SIGMA STAR SAGA

PAUL MACHACEK
IT'S MR PANTS, DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 3

YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

A LOOK AT THE DIFFERENT WAYS THE GAME BOY ADVANCE CAN CONSTRUCT A GRAPHICAL FRAME

The three tile-based graphics modes of the Game Boy Advance are rather flexible, giving developers access to up to four background layers of two different types, depending on the kind of game they're making. Standard backgrounds are up to 512x512 pixels in size and can be independently scrolled in all directions, while affine backgrounds are up to 1024x1024 pixels and can be scaled and rotated as well as scrolled – essentially giving the same effect as the famous SNES Mode 7.



	BACKGROUND 0	BACKGROUND 1	BACKGROUND 2	BACKGROUND 3
Mode 0	Standard	Standard	Standard	Standard
Mode 1	Standard	Standard	Affine	Inactive
Mode 2	Inactive	Inactive	Affine	Affine

MODE 0

This mode offers four standard background layers, and is commonly used in most regular 2D games. In this example from *Astro Boy: Omega Factor*, three layers are used to build a complex cityscape – a slow-moving far background, a near background that moves at medium speed and the foreground that follows Astro's movement. The fourth layer is used for the HUD. As with older consoles, it's possible to simulate additional layers using line-scrolling techniques.

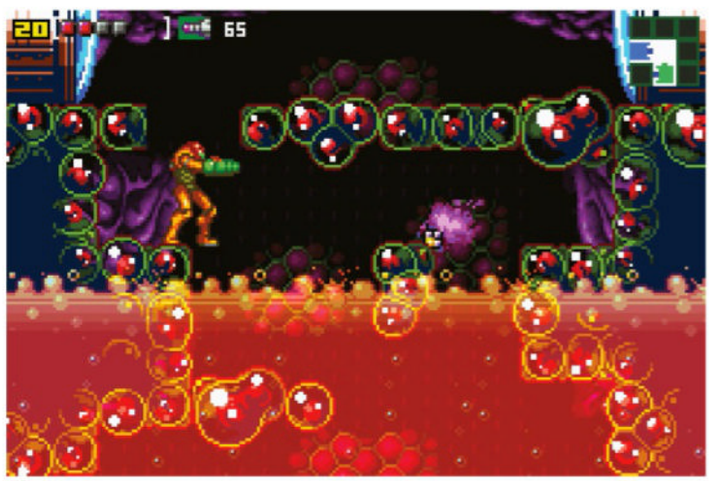
MODE 1

This mode offers two standard background layers and an affine layer. *Tekken Advance* shows how this mode can be cleverly leveraged by changing the data mid-frame. Background 0 is used for the HUD and Background 1 for the far background, which scrolls but doesn't zoom. Background 2, the affine background, is used to provide a zooming effect for the near background. Once it's time to draw the floor, the graphics are swapped out and Background 2 is used to draw this too.

MODE 2

This mode offers two affine background layers. *F-Zero: GP Legend* shows an effective implementation of this mode. The layers are used to draw flat background graphics in the distance, before the data is swapped out mid-frame. Background 2 is used for the track, while Background 3 hosts the slower-moving cityscape underneath. The trade-off is that the entire HUD must be drawn with sprites, reducing the number available for general gameplay.

» [Game Boy Advance] Though often compared to the SNES, the GBA shined brightest doing SNES-style original games.



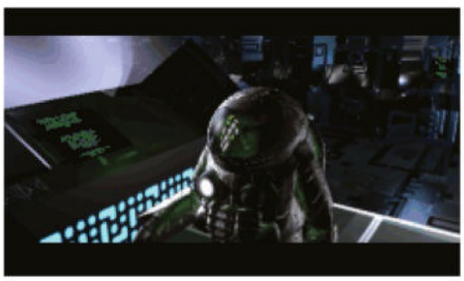
» [Game Boy Advance] *Metroid: Zero Mission* brings together the GBA's effects and colour capabilities to create richly detailed scenes.

life of around 20 hours on two AA batteries. The magazine also reported internet capabilities and connectivity to Nintendo's forthcoming Dolphin console, and anticipated that the Game Boy Advance "is likely to be the first and only portable machine capable of reasonable 3D graphics". The March 2000 issue of *Computer & Video Games* stated that it offered "the potential for SNES quality games" with graphics that would "match flashy SNES titles like *Donkey Kong Country*". *Arcade* went further in its July 2000 issue, suggesting that *Yoshi's Island*, *Super Mario World*, *Super Mario Kart* and *Star Fox* were lined up as launch titles.

The Game Boy Advance was officially revealed alongside the GameCube on 24 August 2000. Many of the previously reported technical details were confirmed, but IGN reported that Nintendo's Atsushi Asada "announced that the GBA would be a dedicated high-quality two-dimensional game platform" and no SNES conversions were shown. So, how much truth was there to the earlier comparisons to the 16-bit classic? "I worked for years on the SNES, so the GBA hardware was very familiar to me," says Mike Stragey. Matt Bozon adds, "Like Mike, I'd worked on the SNES before, and GBA looked like familiar territory."

Paul Machacek remembers the difference in adapting Rare's *Donkey Kong* games for handheld hardware. "The original Game Boy's lower resolution (amongst other things) meant that translating *Donkey Kong Country* to it would not have worked, so we decided to design a new game instead in *Donkey Kong Land*. However, with the GBA we finally had a handheld platform that could run an authentic version of the original SNES *Donkey Kong Country* games, so we ported all of them," he recalls. However, Paul notes the advantages of the handheld system. "The CPU in the GBA was much more powerful than the SNES and the GBA had more RAM as well, though I think they both could display the same number of colours. My memory is a little hazy here folks, but overall I think the GBA was a more powerful system in many ways."

The Game Boy Advance uses a 32-bit ARM7 CPU, running at 16.78 MHz. An 8-bit Sharp SM83 CPU is also included for backwards compatibility



» [Game Boy Advance] This scene from *Super Dropzone*'s intro shows the intended use of the bitmap graphics modes.

» [Game Boy Advance] *Street Fighter Alpha 3* is a bit of a miracle port by the handheld specialists at Crawfish.

purposes, and is unused for Game Boy Advance games. "It felt great, and honestly a huge step up from working on the Game Boy Color," remembers Jas Austin. "Z80 will always be my first love, but the ARM processor was a joy, and so much easier to work on." One of the big changes the Game Boy Advance offered compared to past systems was the ability to code using higher level languages. "It was primarily done in C, but if you wanted to do optimised routines, you could do them in assembler, like when I did my poly engine for the *Virtua Fighter* demo," says Jim Bagley.

> "Z80 WILL ALWAYS BE MY FIRST LOVE, BUT THE ARM PROCESSOR WAS A JOY, AND SO MUCH EASIER TO WORK ON"
> **JAS AUSTIN**

For memory, the Game Boy Advance has 384KB of RAM in three sections. That's more than the 256KB of RAM the SNES offered and a considerable upgrade on the 48KB in the Game Boy Color, but it still proved challenging to work with. "As always the main difficulty with all these older systems was memory size," says Jas. "So it was all about keeping code, memory usage, and assets tight and efficient." Though the CPU is 32-bit, the vast majority of the memory in the GBA is accessed via 16-bit buses, as Jim explains. "It has 32KB of internal work RAM so that was 32-bit, and 96KB of video RAM which was 16-bit and 256KB of external work RAM which again was 16-bit," he says. "The only affect it had, was you had to think about where you were storing your data depending on its use. You had to make the most of the internal work for speed, as it was a lot faster than the external RAM, so you had to make sure anything that was used a lot during the game loop was done with the 32K of internal RAM."

To keep performance up in this scenario, 16-bit Thumb instructions can be used as well as the standard instructions. "I do recall switching back and forth between the 32-bit ARM and 16-bit Thumb instructions sets for a few bits of code. However, the vast majority of *It's Mr Pants* was written in C," remembers Paul, who provides a practical example of when he switched away from the higher-level language in *It's Mr Pants*. "In the final game there was one key area that was coded in assembler: the shape recognition code. It needed to regularly scan the playing grid and look for any completed shapes that met clearance criteria, and whilst I never did any performance testing, my natural reaction was 'that's easy to do in assembler and I just needed it to be fast and didn't even try to code it in C first to see what performance would be like," he explains.

Graphically, the handheld was also highly capable. "The GBA was incredibly powerful for 2D graphics, and rotating sprites, and various background layers," says Jim. "It was great for giving you plenty of options on how to approach doing your game, and what features you want in it, which was a bit of a gain over the Mega Drive and a huge gain over the Master System and Game Boy Color, which I had previously worked on." Like the SNES, the Game Boy Advance draws from a total of 32,768 colours. However, the GBA's Mode 0, commonly used for standard 2D games, offers four background layers with 16-colour or 256-colour palettes – the SNES graphics Mode 0 offers the same number of layers but with four-colour palettes.

"The GBA had a similar capability to the SNES' Mode 7 display, and a lot of GBA games utilised this cool feature," remembers Jas. The GBA's implementation is even more powerful – where the SNES could rotate and scale a single background layer in Mode 7, the GBA

▶ can perform the same effects on up to two layers using Mode 1 and Mode 2. "This did bite us in the arse though," Jas tells us. "I worked on the sadly unreleased GBA game *Jet Riders*. The game used a top-down scrolling view, similar to *Micro Machines*. But one of the most common comments from publishers we approached was, 'Why isn't it 3D like *Mario Kart*?'"

> "I USED ONE OF THE BACKGROUND MODES TO DO A DEMO OF A DOOM GAME, WHICH WAS AN INTERESTING MODE THAT I DON'T THINK MANY DEVELOPERS MADE USE OF"
> **MIKE STRAGEY**

This mode wasn't without its drawbacks, though. "We did have a Mode 7 overhead world map [in *Shantae Advance*] but the drawbacks of that mode are that it's more difficult to do and it's visually more pixelated. Ultimately, the look of the overhead map just didn't fit the look of the rest of the game," explains Mike. Paul had a similar experience with *It's Mr Pants*. "At one point, when *It's Mr Pants* was under it's *DK Coconut Crackers* moniker, you could play the game either 2D top-down, or 3D isometric and I coded the maths for driving the 3D screen plane in assembler, but we ended up dropping that mode as the screen resolution was not high enough to really look all that good, with the complexity of the view for that style of game."

The console had also offered three bitmap modes, intended primarily for creating colourful title and cutscene images, but the powerful CPU meant that software-based 3D rendering was possible. "I used one of the background modes to do a demo of a *Doom* game, which was an interesting mode that I don't think many developers made use of," remembers Mike. "Running code that is capable of that is fairly taxing on the hardware and framerates weren't bad but not great." Still, Jim particularly liked the flexibility these modes added, saying, "With the GPU having a mix of bitmap and tile map modes it meant you could use whichever mode you needed for that particular part of the game you were doing. If you wanted to do 3D or nice title screens you could use bitmap modes, and have tile map menus over the top, or whatever mix it was you needed."

One unusual factor in creating graphics for the GBA was the system's display. The initial model of the console used a reflective LCD screen that relied on natural lighting, similar to that of the Game Boy Color, but early games with dark palettes like *Castlevania* really suffered due to the naturally dark display. Why did this not come up during development? According to Paul, part of that simply comes down to the equipment used. "Although original GB titles had been developed directly using a GB screen, it was simply easier here also to use the dev kit with a CRT display, which didn't exactly replicate the look of a GBA screen, but your neck and shoulders didn't hurt at the end of each day from being hunched over a small screen on your desk."

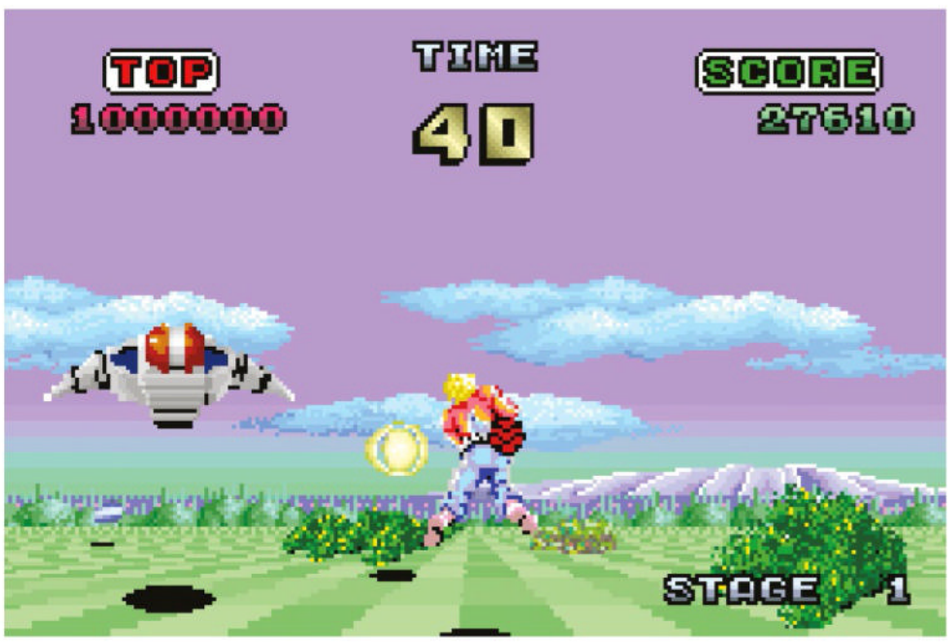
Accessories like the Nyko Worm Light attempted to address the issue of screen brightness, but many users felt that the problem was worth invalidating their warranties over, and modified their consoles with the Afterburner front lighting kit by Triton Labs. An official solution finally came with the release of the front-lit Game Boy Advance SP in 2003, with further improved displays arriving in subsequent GBA-compatible hardware. But with over 33 million original systems in players' hands already, plenty of developers took corrective measures – some simply adopted lighter colour palettes, while other games like *The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap* and *Ballistic: Ecks Vs Sever* offered brightness options by increasing the intensity of the original colour palette.

» [Game Boy Advance] Part of Paul's reason for using assembler in *It's Mr Pants* was simply the challenge of it.

Another area in which the Game Boy Advance had an edge over its older relative was in terms of ROM capacity. SNES cartridges generally topped out at 4MB (32 megabits) for huge games like *Chrono Trigger*, *Donkey Kong Country* and *Super Street Fighter II*, with only rare exceptions like *Tales Of Phantasia* pushing all the way to 6MB. By contrast, 4MB was the absolute smallest ROM size utilised by any Game Boy Advance game, with games such as *Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories* and *Mother 3* utilising whopping 32MB cartridges.

One area in which the Game Boy Advance is less capable is its sound capabilities. The SNES sound chip supports up to eight channels of sampled sound, whereas the portable has just two PCM sample channels. However, the power of the Game Boy Advance CPU comes into play here, as it can be leveraged to perform additional sound sequencing and mixing in software. The original Game Boy's programmable sound generator is also borrowed to provide four extra channels – two pulse wave channels, a custom wave channel and a noise channel.

The mixture of old and new hardware can be heard quite prominently in games like *Sonic Advance*, with the sample channels used for lead instruments and the bassline and other backing sounds assigned to the PSG channels. Why was this approach so common? "Using the PCM channels by directly streaming samples through them does not allow for volume control, for one," explains Mike. "However, processing and mixing audio before sending it through the PCM channels requires considerable CPU and RAM usage. When it comes to trade offs, it's usually, or perhaps always, better to choose gameplay performance over audio quality, especially since



» [Game Boy Advance] The heavy sprite scaling required for *Sega Arcade Gallery* wouldn't have been possible on the SNES.

» [Game Boy Advance] Pre-rendered graphics were much more common on the GBA than on the SNES.

the end result is 8-bit audio coming out of a single tiny speaker, unless you are using headphones."

Nintendo provided a standard audio driver known as MusicPlayer2000, which saw wide use and occasional customisation – different variations can be found in the *Pokémon* games, the *Metroid* games and the *Golden Sun* games. However, attempts to squeeze as much performance as possible from the console resulted in the creation of a number of alternative audio drivers, with popular ones including Krawall, Factor 5's MusyX, GAX from Shin'en, and an engine written by Jan-Lieuwe Koopmans of Engine Software. The result was that Game Boy Advance games could sometimes approach their SNES counterparts, but getting that audio quality was more difficult.

When it comes to communications, the Game Boy Advance doesn't support the rarely used infra-red feature of the Game Boy Color, and solely uses a revamped link cable. This has a plug at each end and a socket in the middle, allowing for up to four systems to be linked together – and unlike with previous Game Boy generations, it is possible to enjoy multiplayer from just one cartridge. However, that mode comes with some severe restrictions as the entire program has to fit in the system's RAM. "We are doing a lot of things in *Shantae GBA* and the sound driver we are using was taking up more RAM than previous drivers, so shifting things [from internal RAM] into external RAM and not having that conflict with the multiplayer multiboot game was a challenge," says Mike. "The multiplayer game uses up nearly 100% of the external RAM when loaded, so the parts of the engine we use for that can't make use of the external RAM."

"The one thing I wished Nintendo had supplied was a solid software communications API to simplify linking multiple GBAs together for multiplayer games," says Paul. "The missing link-cable multiplayer on *It's Mr Pants* is something that annoys me to this day. We already had a game mode where a snake starts in one corner of the playing grid and slowly grows in length, running around the sides and spiralling in towards the middle, thus reducing playable grid space. ▶

SYSTEM SHOWDOWN

DOZENS OF SNES GAMES RECEIVED GBA PORTS – HERE'S HOW SOME OF THEM SHAPED UP

SNES GBA

CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS

■ This one's a bit of a mess – the Game Boy Advance version loses the Mode 7 levels and adds some recycled ones from *Contra: Hard Corps* instead. It also loses the dual weapon system, and the colour saturation has been increased to compensate for the dodgy original GBA screen.

SNES GBA

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

■ The graphics here have been brightened up for the GBA, and some of the boss difficulties have been adjusted. You can save whenever you like on the GBA though, and there are new features – the Hero Mode, plus the Funky's Fishing and Candy's Dance Studio minigames.

SNES GBA

SUPER GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

■ Once again, the graphics are brightened a little and the sound's a little worse. The intro has been redrawn, too. However, the GBA gets an exclusive Arrange Mode, which features remade versions of levels from previous games and tougher variants of the SNES stages.

SNES GBA

SUPER MARIO WORLD

■ The Game Boy Advance version sports a lighter colour palette and noticeably inferior audio. However, it gains a new intro sequence, voice acting, some level design changes and Luigi as a single-player character, complete with *Super Mario Bros 2*-style physics.

SNES GBA

YOSHI'S ISLAND

■ The palette is lighter and the sound's a bit worse, but *Yoshi's Island* gains voice acting and six new secret stages on the GBA, as well as some redesigned areas. One noticeable graphical downgrade is seen in the rougher implementation of the Touch Fuzzy, Get Dizzy effects.

CROSSOVER KING

EXPLORING THE CROSS-PLATFORM INTERACTIONS OF THE GAME BOY ADVANCE

GAME BOY COLOR

A few late Game Boy Color games had additional features available when played in a Game Boy Advance. "When GBA was announced, publisher interest for GBC was beginning to die down, so I was scrambling for a way to add value to the great games that we already had in production. GBC programmer Jimmy Huey came up with the idea of detecting the system at boot up, so we came up with something fun for each game," says Matt Bozon. *Wendy: Every Witch Way* gives access to a new world, and Shantae gains an additional transformation. "Both features were created after the games were done, so this was actual bonus content, not just existing content that was kept locked up!"

GAMECUBE

A dedicated link cable allows for communication between the two consoles, and is most commonly used to send minigames to the GBA using the same multiboot mode used for single-cartridge multiplayer. However, games such as *Pac-Man Vs*, *The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures* and *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* use it as a second gameplay screen. The GameCube can also play GBA games with the Game Boy Player peripheral, and some games include code to support controller rumble when played this way, such as *Drill Dozer* and *Pokémon Pinball: Ruby & Sapphire*.

DS

As well as backwards compatibility, the GBA cartridge slot on the DS allows for interactions between games. The most famous use of this feature is to transfer *Pokémon* from GBA games to DS games, but games such as *Advance Wars: Dual Strike*, *Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow* and *Project Rub* offer unlockable items if related GBA games are detected. *Metroid Prime Pinball* introduced a Rumble Pak that occupied the GBA cartridge slot and was compatible with a variety of games. More unusually, the Japan-only DS game *Daigasso! Band Brothers* had an expansion pack sold on a GBA cartridge.

IMAGE CREDIT: Consoles supplied by Evan Amos

2D OR NOT 2D

THE 3D GAMES THAT DEFIED NINTENDO'S VISION FOR THE HARDWARE

Speaking on the official Nintendo website in 2000, hardware designer Ryuji Umeji claimed that the Game Boy Advance's CPU wasn't up to the task of 3D, and that 3D games would run down the battery more quickly. Despite this claim, as well as the hardware lacking any dedicated polygon-pushing chips, some developers did pursue 3D games on the Game Boy Advance and many of them saw commercial releases.

These games made use of the console's bitmap graphics modes, and because developers had the freedom to write whatever kind of software renderers they wanted, a variety of approaches emerged. Games like *Crazy Taxi: Catch A Ride* use the low-resolution Mode 5 in order to try to keep speed up, while others like *Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam* and *Hot Wheels: Stunt Track Challenge* used untextured polygons in Mode 4. *ATV: Thunder Ridge Riders* even used a voxel engine. Velez & Dubail Dev Team in particular achieved some astonishing results with games, such as *V-Rally 3*, *Asterix & Obelix XXL* and *Driv3r*. These games offered high-resolution textured 3D at good framerates – though without perspective correction, meaning that severe texture warping was sometimes visible at the edges of the screen. None of that detracts from the achievement of creating a 3D open world on hardware that wasn't designed for it, of course.

Some even suggest that the Game Boy Advance had a significant amount of untapped potential for 3D games. The likes of Randy Linden's *Quake* demo, the Raylight Studios *Resident Evil 2* pitch and the OpenLara port of *Tomb Raider* offer ample evidence that it could reasonably handle 3D games of a high quality, lending credence to that point of view.

» [Game Boy Advance] Blocky games like *Crazy Taxi: Catch A Ride* give GBA 3D a pretty bad name.

» [Game Boy Advance] *V-Rally 3* shows that a perfectly good 3D racer is possible on the powerful handheld.

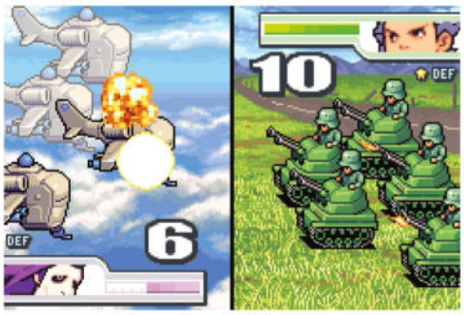
» [Game Boy Advance] *Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam* keeps the draw distance short in the name of performance.

» [Game Boy Advance] A voxel engine is a surprising sight on the GBA, but it performs well.

We used this as a basis for a two-player mode where every time the player on one GBA clears a shape then their snake would shrink, but their opponent's snake would suddenly grow by the same amount. The idea was to play and clear shapes faster than your opponent to push their snake into the middle. It worked really well, was a blast to play actually, but there was some randomness with the comms software and data wouldn't always get sent across. The programmer who wrote it wasn't able to work things out and I ended up faced with either having to rewrite it from scratch myself, and getting it to work well around everything else going on, or scrapping it, which is what happened as I hit an 'immovable deadline.'"

Speaking in the aforementioned Nintendo interview, Umeji said that development kits went out rather quickly, with an initial shipment of 500 followed by a second wave of 1,000. "I actually had one of the Nintendo GBA development boards, which was a large printed circuit board with an LCD in the middle and little pushbutton switches on the edge. I had a lot of fun tinkering with it," says Mike. Indeed, development environments were becoming more standardised at this time. "Whereas in the early days of Rare we used in-house hardware to connect PCs to NES/GB/SNES and either off-the-shelf or custom Editors/Assemblers/Linkers not associated with Nintendo, by this time we just used the standard dev kits that Nintendo provided," says Paul. Likewise, Jas is "pretty sure it was an Intelligent Systems device that connected to a GBA. I do know by this time we had moved away from the custom built BITS hardware".

Although Mike had the official Nintendo SDK, he had to create software tools from scratch. "I wrote the tool using DirectX in C++. It allowed us to load in all the background tile art and animations, create tile maps, layout levels, cut up animations into sprites, create collisions, and place enemies and objects on the tile maps," he explains. "To avoid the lengthy process of building ROM files to test on a cartridge or emulator, I actually coded a separate engine that simulated the GBA. I'm able to write game code, compile, play and debug all within Microsoft Visual Studio. It allows me to develop and iterate very quickly, and being able to debug the code at runtime is priceless."



» [Game Boy Advance] The detailed, varied battle scenes in the *Advance Wars* games are possible because of large ROM sizes.

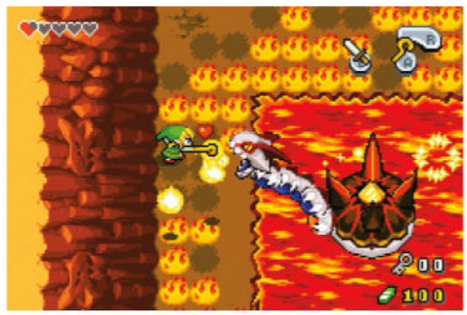
> "I ENJOYED CODING ON IT SO MUCH I WANTED TO DO SOME HOMEBREW STUFF"
> **JIM BAGLEY**

The success of the Game Boy Advance led to a thriving homebrew scene during the system's life, with some commercial releases including *Qwak*, *Thrust Advance* and *Motocross Challenge*. While the homebrew scene never died out, commercial games for the system have only recently started to appear again – though *Shantae Advance: Risky Revolution* and *Kien* aren't homebrew, as both were originally professionally developed during the system's lifespan but never released. *Goodboy Galaxy* is a different story, a new platform adventure from Rik Nicol and Jeremy Clarke who wanted a different challenge from their day job developing mobile games, and started the game as a Game Jam project.

"We used a programming language called Nim, which is not very well known – it is comparable to C in terms of its performance but it looks and feels a lot like Python," Jeremy explains. "It's a language that you can be very productive in once you've gotten good enough at it. And I feel like that really helped us to make the game that we did in the amount of time that we did, compared to if we'd had to do the whole thing or large chunks of it in assembler."

Other than personal nostalgia for the console, the pair were attracted to the GBA as a platform because of the ease of working with it. "I would say it has a lot of learning resources available for it and there is a tutorial called TONC which was the one that I read. That does a really good job of explaining pretty much every conceivable thing that you would need to know hardware-wise for working with it. I think the GBA is in a really good spot there when it comes to community resources and documentation, stuff like that," says Jeremy. "We use Tiled as the level editor, Aseprite for graphics and MilkyTracker and Renoise for music, all of which are fairly modern tools – you could use them for making PC games as well," he continues.

» [Game Boy Advance] Modern GBA developments like *Goodboy Galaxy* are at the quality of original licensed releases.



» [Game Boy Advance] Nintendo developed surprisingly few GBA games in-house – *Zelda: The Minish Cap* was by Capcom.

With *Goodboy Galaxy* now complete and available on Game Boy Advance and Evercade, is another GBA game on the way? "Yeah, that's the plan," says Rik. "We've had a lot of fun making this and there was quite a lot of technical work to get all our tools working, so it just makes sense to use that again to make another project."

It's good to see that the Game Boy Advance is getting developer attention again, because it had a surprisingly short time in the sun. The Nintendo DS was introduced just three years and eight months after the GBA, and the runaway success of the DS resulted in GBA games quickly receiving less attention from players and developers alike, even if they didn't disappear immediately. That just makes what developers achieved with the Game Boy Advance all the more impressive though, as they had less time to really explore the hardware and yet managed to create plenty of absolutely cracking games.

Despite its relatively short life, the Game Boy Advance offered such a leap in power and flexibility that developers remain very fond of it. "You can always produce a wish list of 'missing things', especially in hindsight, but back then we were going forward from a history of 8-bit computers and Nineties consoles, so to hit a solid portable with a 32-bit CPU (yes, slightly strangled by the 16-bit bus) and a much better screen than the original Game Boy was a blessing," says Paul, who describes the system as "great" to work with. Perhaps the most telling tale comes from Jim though, when he tells us the simple reason he bought an Advance Flash cartridge, "I enjoyed coding on it so much I wanted to do some homebrew stuff." You really can't get a better endorsement of a console than that. ✱

» [Game Boy Advance] After the original *Castlevania*'s problems, the two GBA sequels had relatively gaudy colour schemes.

» [Game Boy Advance] It's Shantae at her house, with a good deal more detail than on the Game Boy Color.

» [Game Boy Advance] You can see how the background is set up for Shantae to explore it.

THE MINI MAKING OF SHANTAE ADVANCE

MATT BOZON AND MIKE STRAGEY DISCUSS RISKY REVOLUTION, ITS CANCELLATION AND REVIVAL

How soon after the original *Shantae* did the GBA game go into production?

Matt: Some of the earliest design work began as early as November 2000, when we had our earliest dev kits and prototype hardware. *Shantae* for GBC was still in production at that time. So while me, Erin and Jimmy were busy wrapping up *Shantae 1*, Mike Stragey started to lay the groundwork for the new GBA tech.

What were the things you were hoping to achieve with the more powerful hardware?

Matt: I had a laundry list of features for the next generation of our handheld department, and those were all based on things you'd expect to see in 16-bit-era side-scrollers. *Shantae Advance* was the game intended to prototype all of these features. The way we took these early steps was to finish *Shantae* on GBC at the same time as we were building *The Scorpion King*, which was a proving ground for the *Shantae* GBA game's core features. Those features were then brought back into the *Shantae* GBA game demo, which would go out to publishers. In this way, we were hoping to have a nice feature loop that would carry multiple years of WayForward GBA games!

Was the ability to move between the foreground and background inspired by the additional background layers that the GBA offered?

Matt: Yes, but also by early SNES games with similar ideas: *Super Mario World*, *Super Castlevania IV*, *Super Metroid*, *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, *Demon's Crest* and *Zelda: A Link To The Past*. These games all used various dual-layered gameplay or sorting tricks that we wanted to play with once the GBA came along. Those games, and the incredible *Wario Land* for Virtual Boy, inspired many of the dual-layered gameplay ideas.

How long did work on *Shantae Advance* continue, and how complete was it when work stopped?

Matt: We were in development from 2001-2005, but production stopped twice, once when we'd exhausted all of the publishers we knew (somewhere around 2004), and again after one more attempt – sometime around when the Game Boy Micro was announced.

Shantae Advance looked like a strong game – why did it struggle to find a publisher?

» [Game Boy Advance] *Shantae Advance* looks very nice, so we're rather glad it's not being lost to time.

» [Game Boy Advance] Battle Mode clearly makes use of the GBA's background rotation features.

Matt: The retail market was extremely challenging. It was tough during the GBC days, and became even more so during the GBA days. Before GBA launched, dev time and costs were expected to double or even quadruple, so teams had to grow much bigger and budgets really needed to rise to at least where SNES budgets were ten years earlier. A GBA game was expected to cost players $30 on the low end, and $40 or even $50 dollars for a premium game.

But from our experience, budgets never really went up, and instead it became a race to the bottom. Any game that could be done fast and cheap, and launch on the lowest-cost cartridge and could happily sit at the grocery store end caps for $10, were the most desirable, and we didn't really specialize in things like that. A premium $40-or-above game like ours, with a battery or EEPROM was not looking good, especially when compared to games that were already proven successes from Japan, or big movie- or TV-licensed games in the US.

We did have a couple of bites from publishers who were willing to take a chance, if we could pull the costs way down. We were grateful, but after looking at our options, not even the existing demo could fit onto those cheaper, tiny carts. So we were forced to pack it up.

What prompted WayForward to return to *Shantae Advance* and complete it?

Matt: We talked about doing this for years, especially when digital publishing came along. We figured we might someday have a chance to complete the game and release it digitally. But by 2023, Mike and I hadn't worked together for almost 20 years. We'd reach out on occasion to share some random file we'd found, and wonder if someday we could finish it. There was a time in 2022 when Mike and I happened to be between projects, and Erin had been asking if I had any bucket list games, and conversations always circled back to the GBA game. At the same time, Limited Run Games had been having great success with *Shantae* releases. And they were developing tech for preserving and re-releasing GBA games. The timing was right for everyone, so we jumped at the chance!

Mike: I kept coming across my old *Shantae* archives every time I would organise my office. Each time I did, I figured it was a good reason to reach out to Matt to see how things were going. I never really thought that the old *Shantae* GBA project would get revived. I thought maybe we'd do a modern remake of it or some other game entirely. I had no idea that anyone still made or could make cartridges for the old game systems. Even after Matt and Erin started talking with Limited Run Games, I had little hope that it would get picked up. I was very surprised the day he messaged me that it was greenlit.

How has Game Boy Advance development changed between the original cancellation of *Shantae Advance* and its restart?

Mike: In addition to needing to update the engine and tools to run better in the latest OS versions, we no longer had access to GBA sound drivers we had used in the past, so we had to switch over to a new sound driver. The cartridges we are using to test with are now SD card based. Otherwise, it was like being back to work at WayForward two decades ago.

Matt: For me, it hasn't changed at all. We're still using the same tech and tools. We didn't really benefit from the advancements of tech in the rest of the world. Except for maybe faster build times, and being able to chat and share files faster! In fact, everything else was just a little harder, since our PCs didn't want to support 20-year-old tools, PC graphics modes, or resolutions. So it was a lot of time spent back in our 2002-era time machines until the game was done! But finally here we are, and it's incredible to finally have a game that fans will be playing soon!

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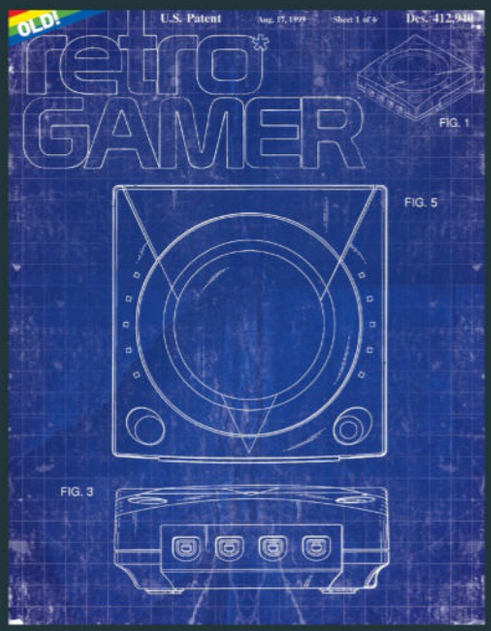

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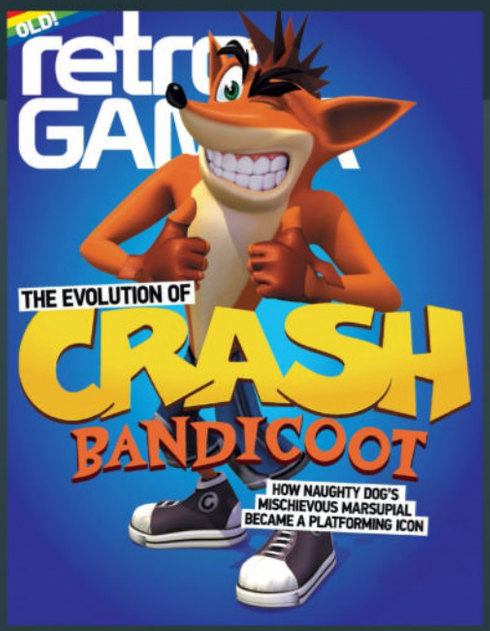

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A RARE CELEBRATION

ISSUE 250

■ Want the definitive article on Rare? This is where you'll find it. A Rare Celebration breaks down every era of the studio, from its early days as Ultimate Play The Game to its exciting N64 years. It concludes with a look at Rare's last two decades at Microsoft and classics like *Rare Replay* and *Sea Of Thieves*. Don't miss it.

40 YEARS OF THE ZX SPECTRUM

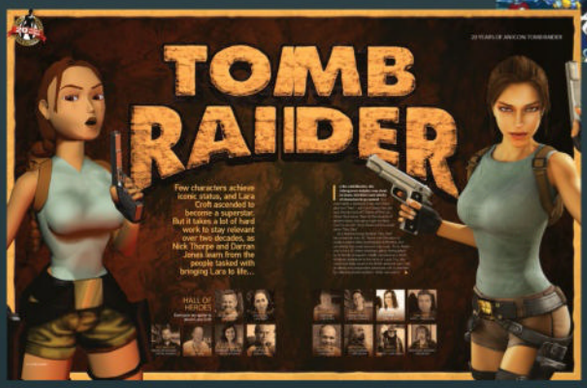
ISSUE 232

■ This in-depth article features a number of prominent game developers and breaks down the lifespan of the humble Speccy on a year-by-year basis, from its early innovative games to its exciting homebrew era which is still going strong today. If you're a Commodore 64 fan you'll find a similar feature on that system in **RG** 238.

A TRIBUTE TO TREASURE

ISSUE 219

■ One of our most popular features has been our A Tribute To series, which highlights a developer's back catalogue and includes input from the creators. It all kicked off in issue 219 with Masato Maegawa guiding us through Treasure's 32-year history. Other notable articles in the series include Ocean Software (**RG** 244) and Falcom (**RG** 224).



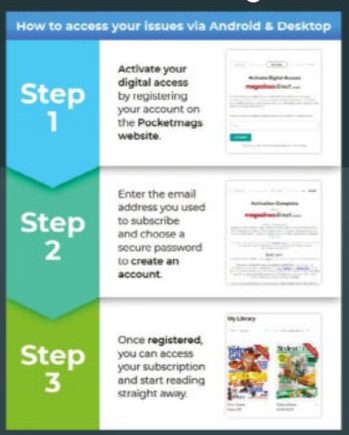
20 YEARS OF TOMB RAIDER

ISSUE 163

■ We wanted to do something truly special for Lara Croft's 20th anniversary so we spoke to a huge number of *Tomb Raider* veterans to give an incredibly comprehensive overview of the popular series. If you're a fan of the *Tomb Raider* series you'll find this article is filled with fascinating insight about the blockbuster franchise.

ACCESSING YOUR BACK ISSUES

Start enjoying ten years of Retro Gamer with this useful guide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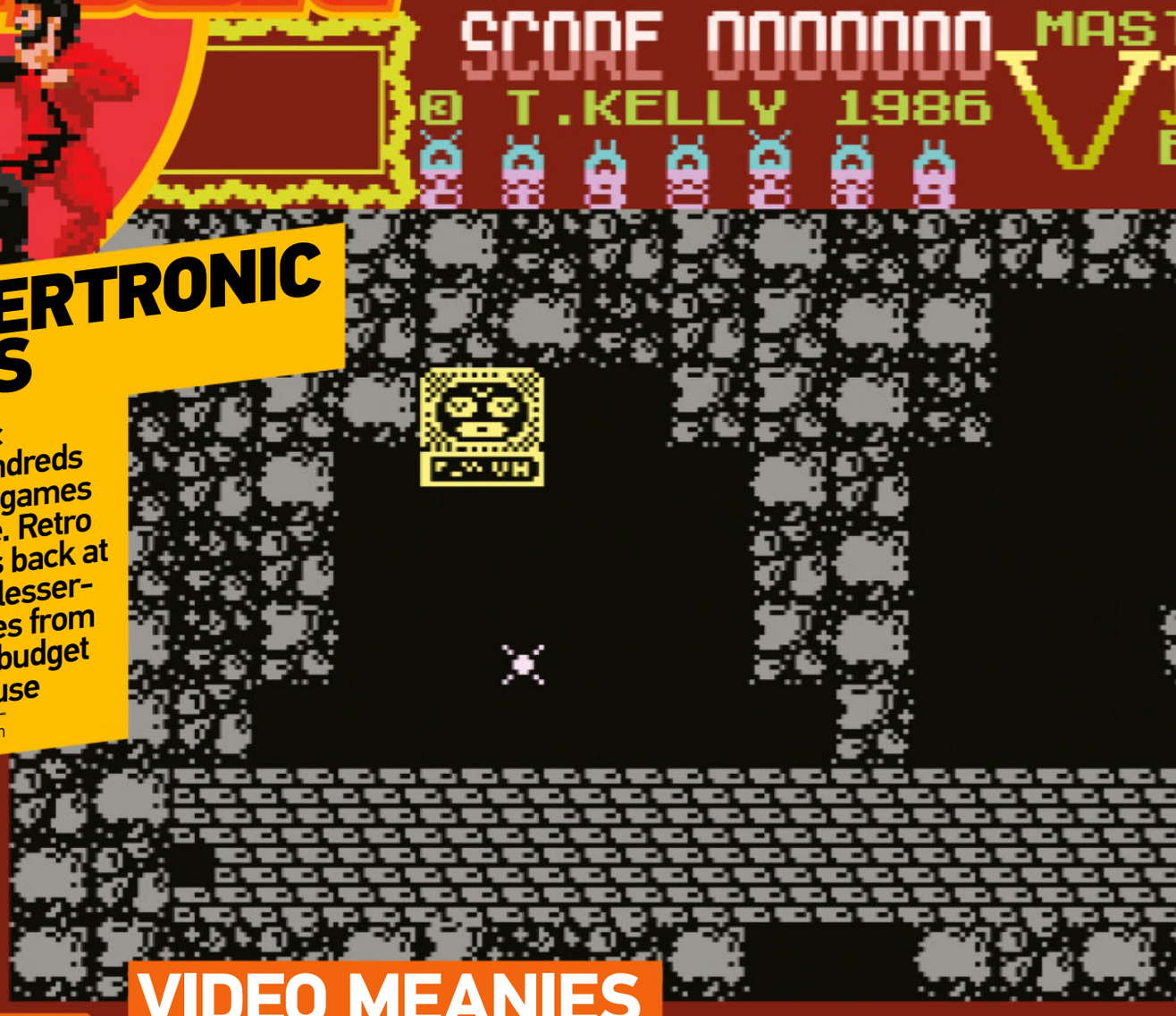
Minority Report

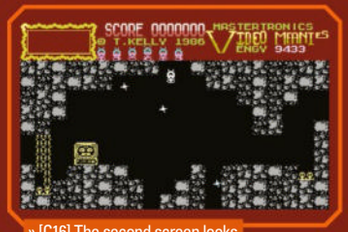
INTERESTING GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED



MASTERTRONIC GAMES

Mastertronic released hundreds of low-price games in its lifetime. Retro Gamer looks back at some of the lesser-known games from this famous budget software house

Words by Graeme Mason



» [C16] The second screen looks easy, but with three Meanies buzzing around, it's anything but.

» [C16] Those four Meanies are trapped and harmless – but you'll need to release them to progress.

VIDEO MEANIES

■ DEVELOPER: **TONY KELLY** ■ YEAR: **1986**

■ **With its wide-eyed, comical cover from artist John Smyth and colourful title lettering, it would be easy to dismiss Tony Kelly's *Video Meanies* as a juvenile platform game of some description.** In truth, it's one of the finest C16 games from Mastertronic, a novel blaster with a steep challenge but a good sense of progression. The player assumes the role of a poor, downtrodden robotic videogame shop employee – but this is not your standard game shop. Perched on the top of a mountain, this particular establishment is a castle owned by an eccentric millionaire. During the day, it's a typical games shop, selling piles of cassettes to eager customers; yet once night falls, the Meanies come out, and each room of the store turns into a death trap. Unfortunately for this metal guardian, its master has left all the video-cassette machines running – the maintenance droid has to turn off each before they can head to bed, or whatever robots do to rest [Put their feet up with a nice can of oil? – Ed].

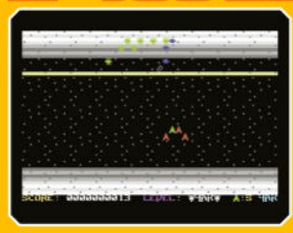
The Meanies themselves flit about each room, bouncing off the walls and zapping the player whenever they come in contact with them. The robot's cannon can destroy some walls; others are deadly to the touch, and some are invisible. Every time the player turns off a video machine, a small piece of the puzzle appears in the top left-hand corner, while keys allow the player to access locked locations. Once the entire title of the game is revealed, the robot's job is done for the night. Zapping Meanies only disables them temporarily; agility is as key in *Video Meanies* as blasting skills.

Uncomplicated yet entertaining and professionally produced, *Video Meanies* was a bargain for C16 owners, with plenty of puzzling gameplay bolstered by some exciting shooting action. Sales-wise, it did decent business for Mastertronic,

despite falling short of best-sellers such as *Vegas Jackpot*, *Kikstart* and Tony's earlier game, *Mr Puniverse*. Nevertheless, buoyed by the success, Tony himself converted *Video Meanies* to the C64, and while it is quite different visually, it maintains the elements that made the original so fun, scoring a credible 71% in *Zzap!64* magazine.

The prolific Tony Kelly created five games for the C16 in 1985, followed by this, his last, in 1986. After a handful of C64 games, it sadly appears that this talented coder left the industry. *Video Meanies* remains his charming and amusing swan song to the C16.

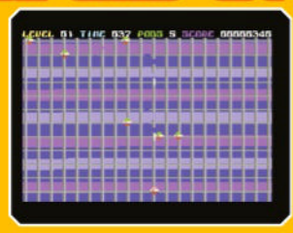
IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...



VOIDRUNNER

C64, 1987

■ Jeff Minter's final Commodore 64 game, *Voidrunner*, is the third in the Yak's *Gridrunner* series. While the presentation is top-notch, the graphical style began to look dated by 1987. Nevertheless, the manic and gripping gameplay is as satisfying as ever.



POD – PROOF OF DESTRUCTION

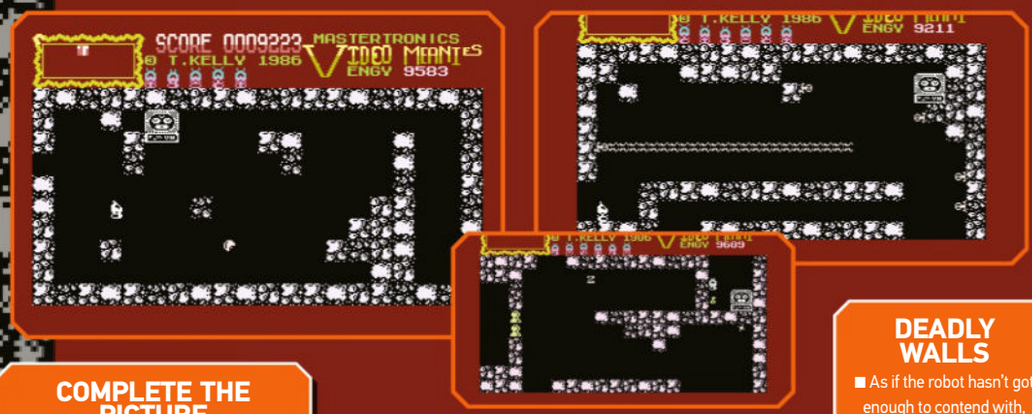
SHAUN SOUTHERN, 1987

■ Mr Chip's Shaun Southern proved his all-round capabilities once more with this excellent C64 shoot-'em-up. A catchy tune, intense in-the-zone gameplay, and an overall high standard that wouldn't be out of place in a full-price release completes the package.

DEVIL'S CROWN

BRIAN O'SHAUGHNESSY, 1985

■ Despite middling reviews (*Crash* magazine awarded it 54%), this is a fun shoot-'em-up/exploration game that evokes the spirit of an earlier budget game, John Cain's *Booty*. The player's deep-sea diver explores a dangerous sunken wreck for, erm, booty.



IN DEPTH

COMPLETE THE PICTURE

■ Switching off a video recorder reveals one segment of this picture, providing an easy way to keep track of your progress.

DEADLY WALLS

■ As if the robot hasn't got enough to contend with, these snow-coloured walls spell instant destruction should it touch one.

THE MEANIES

■ These small but fast enemies occupy every screen, often trapped as here. You'll need to free them to get to that video recorder.

DESTRUCTIBLE WALLS

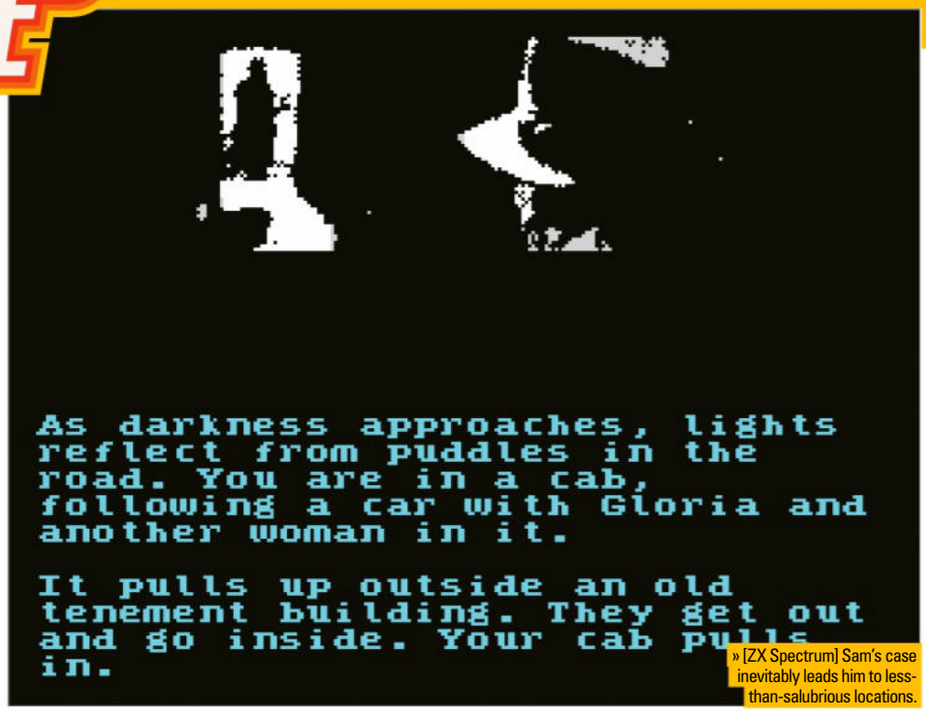
■ These walls, constructed from small bricks, frequently impede progress. Fortunately, you can destroy them with the robot's cannon.

Minority Report

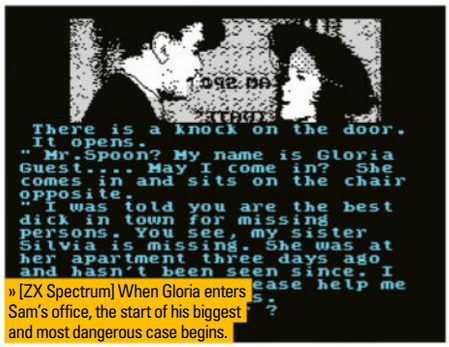
PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

■ DEVELOPER: **RUBBERCHIP** ■ YEAR: **1986**

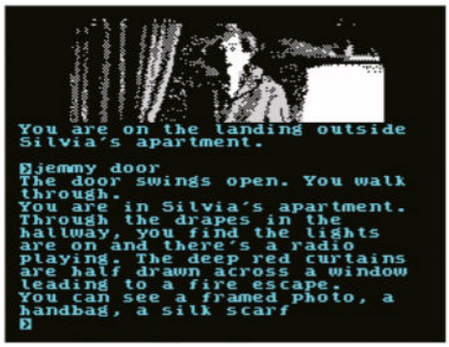
■ **Despite the efforts of certain publishers such as CRL and Incentive, the text adventure was dying a slow commercial death by the mid-Eighties.** However, when the latter software house released The Graphic Adventure Creator, it inspired a legion of would-be game writers to assemble their own adventures, complete with rudimentary graphics. One Spectrum fan, the mysterious 'Rubberchip', adapted The Graphic Adventure Creator to display digitised graphics and a bespoke font. As the name suggests, *Play It Again, Sam* is a noir-style detective adventure set in the mid-Thirties, starring a private investigator named Sam Spoon. "Life is funny, ain't it," muses Sam early in the story. "Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down, and nobody gives a damn." Sam is idly ignoring his final demands when a strange woman wanders in, asking him to find her missing sister. It's a case that will challenge every fibre of Sam's little grey cells and put him toe-to-Tommy gun with the mob and its leader, Mr Big. *Play It Again, Sam* contains several glorious scene-setting pictures and a nice line in hardboiled detective fiction, with dangerous dames, burly mobsters and painful interrogations all part of the story. With its atmospheric (and long) descriptions, an economical parser and well-set puzzles, this is an outstanding budget adventure for fans of the genre.


As darkness approaches, lights reflect from puddles in the road. You are in a cab, following a car with Gloria and another woman in it.
It pulls up outside an old tenement building. They get out and go inside. Your cab pulls in.

» [ZX Spectrum] Sam's case inevitably leads him to less-than-salubrious locations.


There is a knock on the door.
It opens.
" Mr.Spoon? My name is Gloria Guest.... May I come in? She comes in and sits on the chair opposite.
" I was told you are the best dick in town for missing persons. You see, my sister Silvia is missing. She was at her apartment three days ago and hasn't been seen since. I ease help me
s."?

» [ZX Spectrum] When Gloria enters Sam's office, the start of his biggest and most dangerous case begins.


You are on the landing outside Silvia's apartment.
Djemmy door
The door swings open. You walk through.
You are in Silvia's apartment. Through the drapes in the hallway, you find the lights are on and there's a radio playing. The deep red curtains are half drawn across a window leading to a fire escape.
You can see a framed photo, a handbag, a silk scarf
D

MORE GAMES TO PLAY

» BANDITS AT ZERO

■ DEV: **SHAUN SOUTHERN**
■ YEAR:**1986**

■ **This C16/Plus/4 exclusive saw Mr Chip programmer Shaun Southern's talents shine again.** Essentially a *Defender* clone, *Bandits At Zero* continued Mastertronic's support of the lesser Commodore machines into its *MAD* range, retailing at £2.99. The extra pound was well justified with this sleek and engaging shoot-'em-up that impresses with its exceptional parallax scrolling. Another C16 marvel from Shaun.

» RESCUE

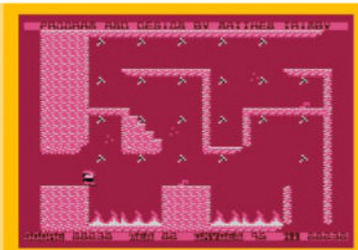
■ DEV: **STE CORK, MARK O'NEIL & TONY WILLIAMS**
■ YEAR:**1987**

■ **By 1987, Mastertronic was a regular in the reviews pages of magazines, so the absence of *Rescue* (save for a mention in *Your Sinclair*'s end-of-year budget round-up) is mystifying, especially given it's a worthy little maze shooter.** As a security officer, your task is to rescue scientists from an alien invasion and *Rescue* controls and plays incredibly well for a £1.99 game.

» NINJA MISSION

■ DEV: **SCULPTURED SOFTWARE**
■ YEAR:**1987**

■ **Despite its many bugs, Mastertronic made huge bank with *Ninja*.** Having received a significant graphical and audio overhaul for the Amiga, the gameplay is the same singular yet diverting run-and-beat-'em-up that made the 8-bit versions so popular. For its 'budget' price of £14.95, *Ninja Mission* was a decent target for software-starved Amiga owners, and the game boasts beautiful backgrounds.



» CRYSTAL RAIDER

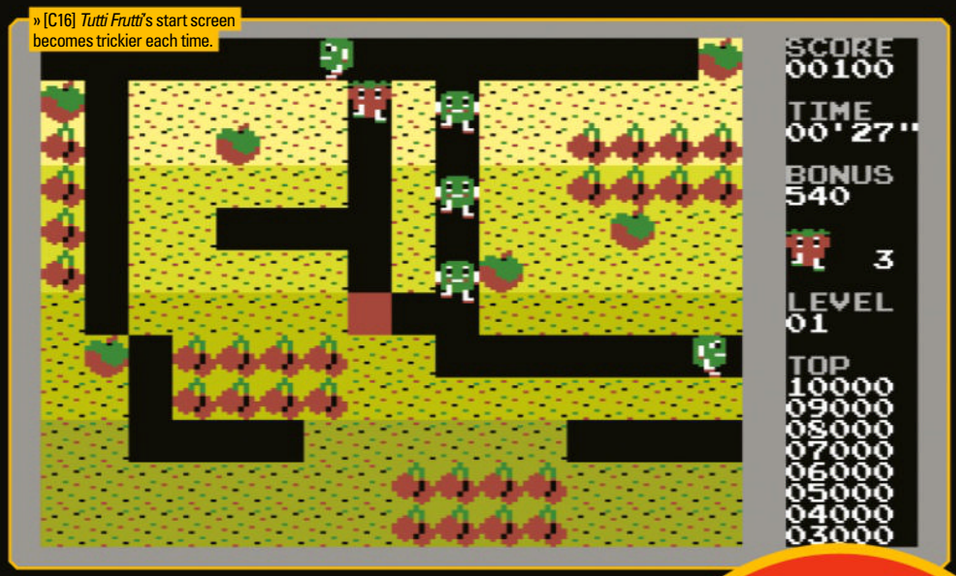
■ DEV: **MATTHEW TRIMBY**
■ YEAR:**1986**

■ **Mastertronic supported the Atari 8-bit format well into the late-Eighties, and this superb collect-'em-up is one of two Atari exclusives of this time (alongside *Power Down*).** The player is the eponymous adventurer, searching underground caverns for crystals before their oxygen runs out. *Crystal Raider* is a functional but easy-going game that boasts an unusual night mode for brave explorers.

TUTTI FRUTTI

■ DEVELOPER: **SHAUN SOUTHERN** ■ YEAR: **1985**

■ **It's that man Shaun Southern again, this time with a marvellous *Mr Do!*, *Boulder Dash* and *Pengo* homage for the C16 and Plus/4.** The first thing you'll notice is Shaun's catchy tune on *Tutti Frutti*'s score and attract screens, and it's just another example of the supreme presentation the programmer imbues in all of his games. The player is Super Strawberry, king of the orchard and collector of the rival fruits. Throughout the first two colourful stages, the player guides Super Strawberry, picking up cherries, escaping falling apples and avoiding the deadly Acid Apple Gang members. Fortunately, Strawberry is not totally unarmed: he has a bouncing missile to zap the Acid Apples. The scene shifts for the third stage, the *Pengo* section. Here, Strawberry can push the blocks of cherries that form the walls against the Acid Apples – when they're all squished, it's back to the first stage, with a different layout and faster enemies. *Tutti Frutti* is a wonderful high-speed arcade game that fully uses the C16's extensive colour palette. It may be derivative and only contain three different screens – but there's enough variety, colour and delight to make it one of the best games on the C16 – at any price.



» [C16] *Tutti Frutti*'s start screen becomes trickier each time.

» [C16] In this *Pengo*-inspired third level, Super Strawberry uses cherries to squash Acid Apples. Look, just go with it, OK?

RETRO STINKER

» WALK THE PLANK

■ UNKNOWN ■ 1985

■ **While it supported the Electron (and BBC Micro), beyond re-releases, Mastertronic's record here was distinctly less impressive.** This boring *Connect 4* clone is a prime example.

» KIKSTART

■ DEV: **MR CHIP SOFTWARE**
■ YEAR:**1986**

■ **Shaun Southern's original C64 game often gets overshadowed by its sequel; the C16 version, also by Shaun and Mark Morris, even more so.** The gameplay is inevitably pared back – it's just one player versus the track – but this simplicity makes *Kikstart* just as compelling as the biker tackles hills, buses, aerial obstacles and more. *Kikstart* is massive fun and a budget gem for C16 owners.

» COLONY

■ DEV: **STE CORK**
■ YEAR:**1987**

■ **Mastertronic's development partner, Icon Design, delivered a number of original and converted titles.** In *Colony*'s uncommon concept, the player is a droid, protecting and maintaining a settlement of humans on a distant – and hazardous – planet. Released on Mastertronic's Bulldog label, it's an underrated game with early resource management gameplay that failed to find a market.

» ROCKMAN

■ DEV: **M & S SREBALIUS**
■ YEAR:**1984**

■ **Like the C16, the VIC-20 was well supported by Mastertronic, releasing 17 games for the unexpanded computer.** The Atari 8-bit classic *Boulder Dash* has inspired many clones over the years, and *Rockman* mines the concept further, the familiar gameplay making it not just one of the best Mastertronic games on the system but also one of the VIC-20's finest budget games overall.

» BOMB FUSION

■ DEV: **RICHARD STEVENSON, AL DUKES**
■ YEAR:**1989**

■ **Like most primarily 8-bit companies, Mastertronic was struggling by the end of the Eighties as sales of its Commodore 64 and Spectrum games dropped rapidly.** While obviously a homage to the classic bomb-collecting game, *Bomb Jack*, *Bomb Fusion* neatly evinces another arcade game, *Flicky*, as the player dashes around each screen, closely followed by the sentient fuel capsules.

02
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10

Tecmo Super Bowl

"YOU GOTTA TACKLE ME, IT'S B"

» NES » 1991 » TECMO

One of our readers recently expressed their dismay that in Retro Gamer's 20 years on the shelves, we hadn't covered *Tecmo Super Bowl*, saying, "British people simply don't know what they missed out on." Fair cop – Tecmo's game never made it to PAL regions, so the first time I became aware of the enduring fondness for *Tecmo Super Bowl* was when I saw it on *Family Guy*. Since I have an appreciation for the NFL thanks to *Madden NFL 94*, *NFL 2K* and a year spent living with a couple of Essex Blades players, I decided that it was high time I give it a go.

My first impression was unsurprisingly coloured by my introduction to the game, and it turns out that using Bo Jackson may as well be cheating – but then given that he played at the top level in both the NFL and Major League Baseball, he's practically a human cheat code as it is. Once I was over that, I was pleasantly surprised by how intuitive *Tecmo Super Bowl* is. Calling plays is easy to figure out, and while you'd expect running plays to present no problems, both passing and kicking plays are also simple to execute.

What stood out the most to me was the various little cutaway animations for key moments and incidents, which manage to capture the drama on the field when the ball sails through the arms of a defender attempting an interception, or when the kicker goes for the conversion. Although these animations do interrupt the action very briefly, they stand out as a pretty elegant way to enhance the presentation as the main sprites have to be tiny to ensure a good view of the game. It's no wonder people are still playing *Tecmo Super Bowl* to this day and I feel like grabbing a copy for the next time I catch up with my old housemates – but the Raiders are banned. ✱

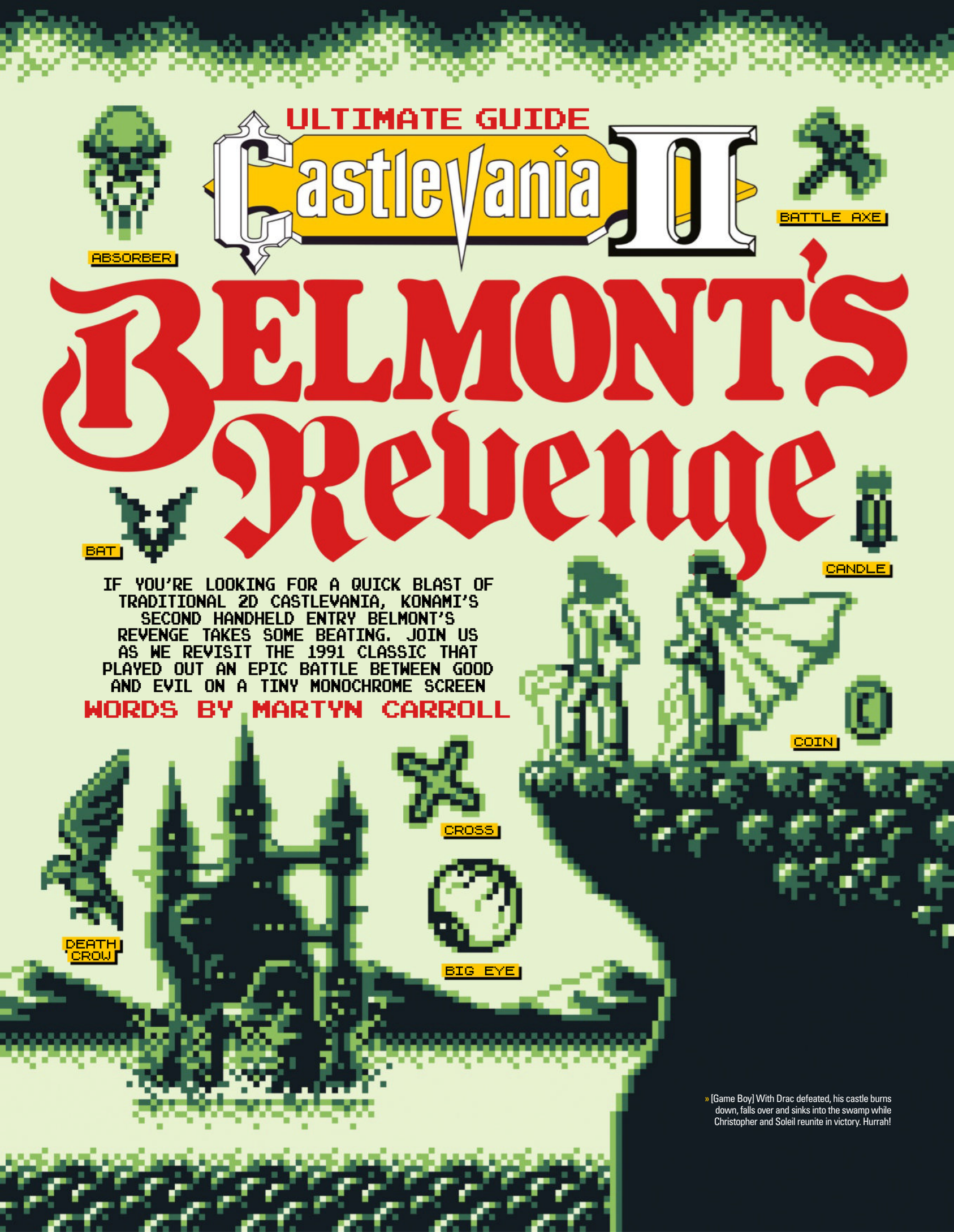
ULTIMATE GUIDE

Castlevania II

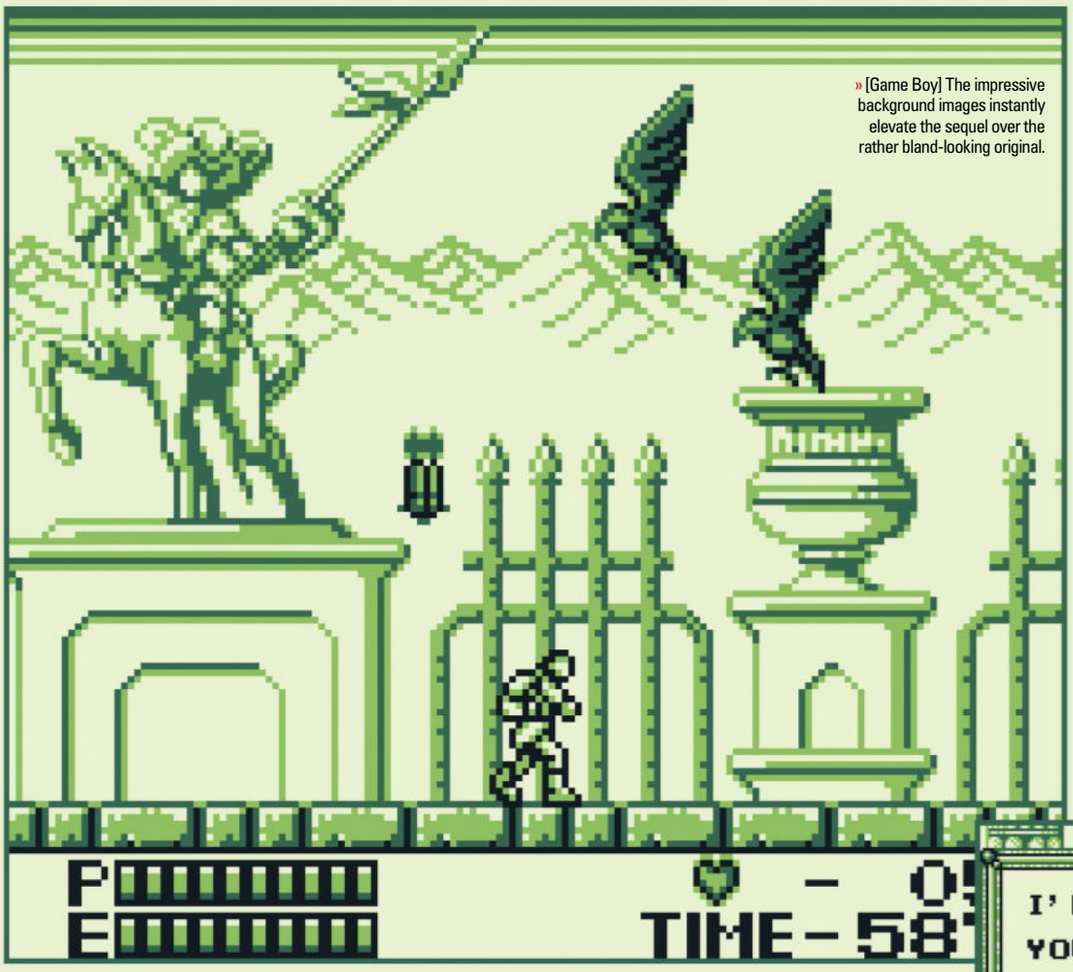
BELMONT'S Revenge

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A QUICK BLAST OF TRADITIONAL 2D CASTLEVANIA, KONAMI'S SECOND HANDHELD ENTRY BELMONT'S REVENGE TAKES SOME BEATING. JOIN US AS WE REVISIT THE 1991 CLASSIC THAT PLAYED OUT AN EPIC BATTLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL ON A TINY MONOCHROME SCREEN

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL



» [Game Boy] With Drac defeated, his castle burns down, falls over and sinks into the swamp while Christopher and Soleil reunite in victory. Hurrah!

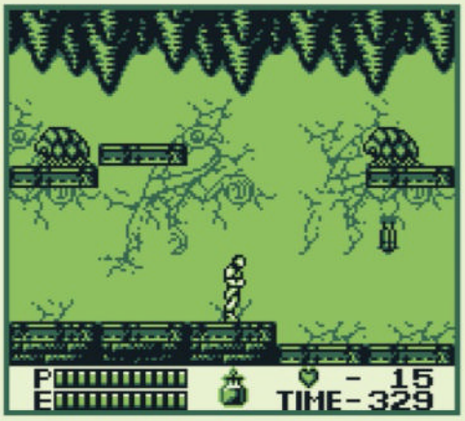


» [Game Boy] The impressive background images instantly elevate the sequel over the rather bland-looking original.

"THE BOSSES IN THE ORIGINAL WERE UPGRADED FOR THE SEQUEL TO BE MORE IMPOSING AND DYNAMIC"

» The game's cover artist Tom duBois was commissioned to produce a special illustration for the magazine ad.

» [Game Boy] It wouldn't be a *Castlevania* game without some bad guy talking trash.



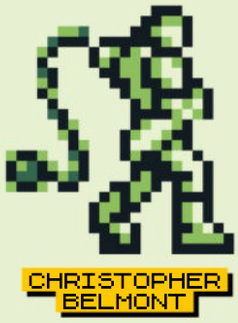
» [Game Boy] The game is full of neat little touches, like this cave where whipping the candles plunges it into darkness – and wakes up those icky Cave Snails.

***Castlevania* is a series with very few misfires.** Despite more than 30 games appearing over almost 40 years, we can't pinpoint any truly terrible entries. Those games that didn't land too well at the time, such as the 3D *Castlevanias* for the N64 and PS2, are now ripe for reappraisal, and even ill-advised spin-offs like *Judgement* and *Harmony Of Despair* have their fans.

If there's one game that tends to sit at the bottom of the pile, critically, it's *Castlevania: The Adventure*. This 1989 series debut for the Game Boy is widely denounced for its uninspiring visuals and leaden pace – playing it feels like protagonist Christopher Belmont is wading through molasses with two broken ankles. We could perhaps blame these shortcomings on the Game Boy's limited hardware – except that two years later, Konami released a direct sequel that improved on the original in every imaginable way. *Belmont's Revenge* was Konami's redress and our reward.

Although it's obvious the team identified the original's flaws when designing the sequel, this was confirmed with the 2019 release of *Castlevania Anniversary Collection*. In the compilation's history section (a real treasure trove for fans), Konami shares the original design documents and this includes notes of an internal meeting dated 29 September 1990, where the development team discussed the original game's "weak points". There were quite a few. Top of the list, unsurprisingly, was "slow player movement", which they addressed by making Belmont more fleet of foot. Highlighted next was "bad checkpoint positions", and indeed there weren't enough in the original, meaning you'd get thrown back several screens when you died. The sequel solved this by saving your position when you passed through doorways.

The castle guardians were third on the list, with the comment "need more variations/ ideas for the bosses". The bosses in the original were rather routine and they were upgraded for the sequel to be more imposing and dynamic (see the Boss Rush panel). It was also suggested that sub-weapons from the home-console titles should be included, because in the original Belmont was armed with just his trusty whip. So second time around he was given access to the holy water and axe (switched for the boomerang-like cross in the Japanese version). At the end of



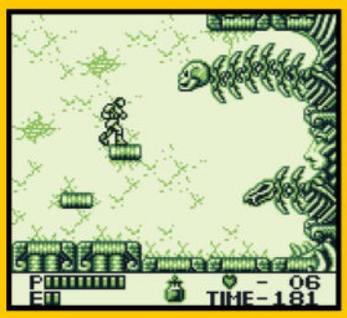
BOSS RUSH

GARLIC DOESN'T CUT IT IN THIS GAME

DARK SIDE

■ The Crystal Castle boss is a cloaked magician who morphs into a crystal and summons an evil cloud that tries to zap you with lightning.

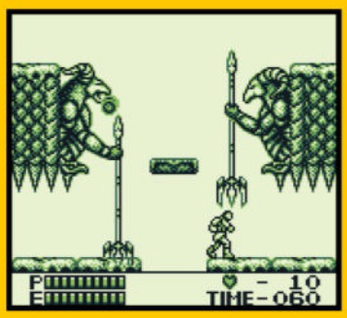
How To Beat Them: You can only inflict decent damage when the boss is in its crystal form. Keep moving to dodge the lightning and jump the surge each strike generates.



ANGEL MUMMY

■ At the end of Cloud Castle you encounter this bizarre boss which flings its bones around the screen and also spits fireballs.

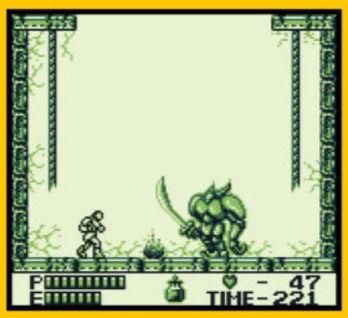
How To Beat Them: Stay low and keep whipping the bottom skull. The axe is handy as a well-placed throw will hit both heads. Duck down when the bones start flying.



KUMULO AND NIMBLER

■ The twin guardians of Plant Castle move in and out, trying to skewer you with their tridents and frazzle you with fireballs.

How To Beat Them: Jump on the central platform and stay there. Whip them when they're close, and chuck your axe when they retreat. The fireballs can be whipped.



IRON DOLL

■ The Rock Castle boss is a sword-wielding, armour-clad heavyweight. When you half his health he sheds his armour and becomes more lethal.

How To Beat Them: Ignore the ropes! Whip off his armour, then keep ducking to avoid his sword energy blasts. Hopefully you have some holy water to slosh around.

THE QUEST CONTINUES

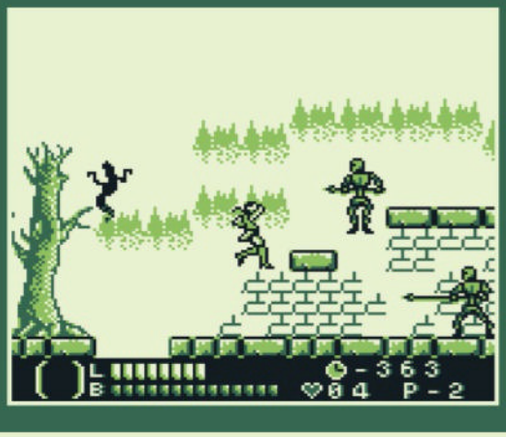
WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE AND AFTER BELMONT'S REVENGE

CASTLEVANIA: THE ADVENTURE

■ Time has not been kind to the series' Game Boy debut, especially in light of the far superior sequel. Everything about it is bland – the visuals, the levels, the bosses. It's also infuriatingly hard, as every hit downgrades your whip, and don't get us started on the nightmarish third stage which was clearly designed by masochists. Compounding everything is the game's dawdling pace – seemingly a design decision as there's a modded version floating around online that speeds everything up with no ill-effects.

CASTLEVANIA LEGENDS

■ Released six years after *Belmont's Revenge*, and just before the launch of the Game Boy Color, this should have been a fine swan song for the series on the original Game Boy. Sadly *Legends* is content to repeat the mistakes of the first game rather than build on the second. The visuals have been dialled back and the levels are long and boring. It's quite cool to play as female vampire slayer Sonia Belmont, and there's more plot this time – although it has since been declared non-canonical. Apathy all round.



▶ the list were comments on the ropes that replaced the infamous stairs from the earlier games. Those stairs were a pain, but the ropes were somehow worse, leading to frustration as you were completely defenceless while climbing. The sequel tackled this by allowing you to use your whip while on a rope, and it was also possible to quickly slide down ropes, out of danger's way.

These gameplay fixes alone would have resulted in a superior game, but the team went further by delivering a larger and more involving adventure. There were now seven stages as opposed to four, and the first four stages (each an individually themed castle – Crystal, Cloud, Plant and Rock) could be tackled in any order. The stages themselves were better designed, requiring less plodding

» [Game Boy] Beware the Absorbers. These things will suck up your hearts so you can't use sub-weapons.

BONE DRAGON

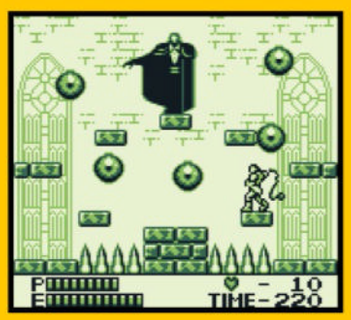
■ The first mini-boss of Dracula's Castle is a bony serpent which burrows through holes in the floor and ceiling, trying to crush you to death.

How To Beat Them: The screen auto-scrolls so head to the right to avoid getting trapped. Strike its head when it appears, then dodge its body and keep moving right.

SOLEIL BELMONT

■ Your son in demon form is the prelude to the final battle. He's armed with a chain whip and will fire possessed daggers at you.

How To Beat Them: Soleil is fast and deadly, so stay out of his way by jumping up on the platforms and whip him when he approaches. The axe comes in very handy here.



COUNT DRACULA

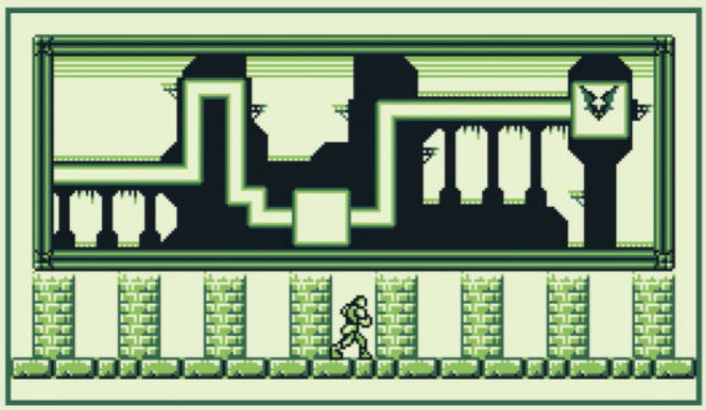
■ Revived by the souls of the other bosses, Drac materialises and tries to vaporise you with eight spinning balls o' death. Fangs for that.

How To Beat Them: If the platforms were a clock, he appears at 12, 8, 10, 2, 6, 4, 12 and 6 o'clock, then repeats the cycle. Pre-empt his position and unleash when he appears.

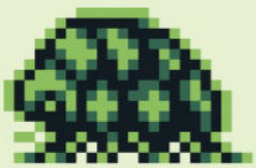
and more probing. Secret rooms returned but there were more of them, and on occasions there was a choice of two paths through a stage. The bigger game was made possible thanks to a larger 128K-sized cart (double that of the original), and the extra space also allowed for additional graphics data, resulting in more varied sprites and backgrounds.

The sequel presented a sizeable quest, and it was nearly bigger still according to the design docs. Following the usual showdown with Dracula at the game's conclusion, the initial plan was to have the Count's castle start to collapse around your ears, and you had to escape via a dozen rooms as the roof fell in. Maybe it was too ambitious, or they ran out of cart space, but this climactic scene was removed from the final release. Instead, it cuts straight to the end scene where Christopher and his son Soleil (mistranslated as 'Soleiyu' in the Western release) watch from afar as the castle crumbles to the ground and the credits roll.

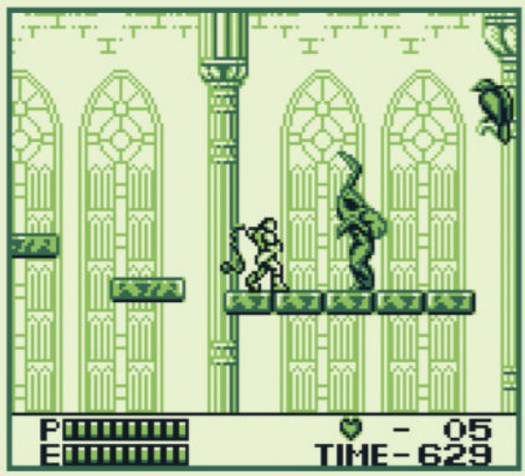
Belmont's Revenge debuted in Japan in July 1991, with the North American release appearing one month later. It reviewed strongly in the US – *Nintendo Power* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly* awarded it averaged scores of 4/5 and 8/10 respectively, with the latter commenting, "This is about as good as an action game can get on the Game Boy." The game wouldn't arrive in Europe for another 15 months (November 1992), making it a desirable import – especially as several UK mags reviewed the US version when



» [Game Boy] Having stormed the first four castles, you get to finally confront the Count, deep in the keep.



"THE BIGGER GAME WAS MADE POSSIBLE THANKS TO A LARGER 128K-SIZED CART"



ILLUSTRATOR Q&A

TOM DUBOIS ON HOW HE CREATED THE COVER ART FOR BELMONT'S REVENGE AND OTHER KONAMI GAMES

CAN YOU EXPLAIN HOW THE PROCESS WORKED FOR EACH ILLUSTRATION?

The process was rather basic. I'd go to the ad agency in downtown Chicago, which was within walking distance of my little loft, and the art director would describe the game. Then he'd give me all the material he had on it which was never very much. I never got to play any of the games but sometimes they would give me VHS tapes of the gameplay so I could get a feel for the characters.

HOW MUCH CREATIVE FREEDOM WERE YOU GIVEN, AND WERE YOU EVER ASKED TO TONE ANYTHING DOWN?

Creative freedom varied. Sometimes the art director had something very specific in mind. Other times they would just unleash me and let me go. I don't recall ever being asked to tone it down. I think I actually got hired for the expression I would put into the art.

WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF THE *BELMONT'S REVENGE* COVER?

This was one of the early covers and I remember that no revisions were required. My first concept was approved and I had everything all lined up to just cut my groove. I'm guessing it took a couple weeks from start to finish because I remember it going quite smoothly and I also did a magazine ad for the game too. Nowadays, that *Belmont's Revenge* cover would take me a couple of months at least. I do remember doing this and every other cover like it would be the only cover I would get. I was never told there would be another game down the line. Lucky for me they kept coming.

» Tom illustrated the covers for many Konami titles released outside of Japan.

» Tom's cover shows a buffed-up Christopher Belmont taking on Rock Castle boss Iron Doll. "I always tried to make my guys BAMFs," he says.

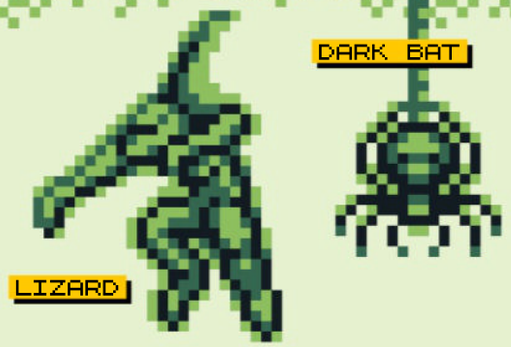
WHAT WAS YOUR MAIN INSPIRATION FOR YOUR *CASTLEVANIA* ARTWORK?

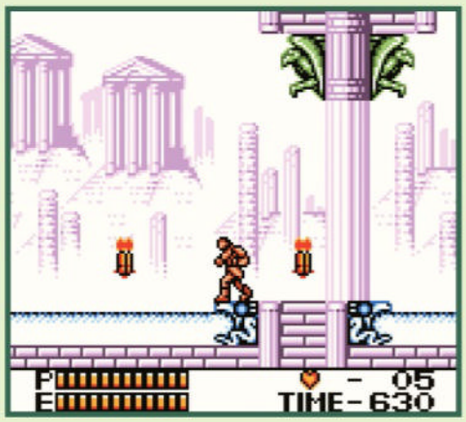
Ray Harryhausen! I remember going with my older brothers to the movie theatre and seeing *Jason And The Argonauts* for the first time. I was aged six or seven and like so many impressionable kids I was completely mesmerised by the entire film, but the giant bronze Talos, that crazy Hydra, and the skeleton army absolutely rocked my world. And I can reflect on those particular elements in that film as my store of value for my work on *Castlevania*.

HOW DO YOU REFLECT ON CREATING SUCH WELL-LOVED ARTWORK FOR KONAMI AND THE *CASTLEVANIA* SERIES IN PARTICULAR?

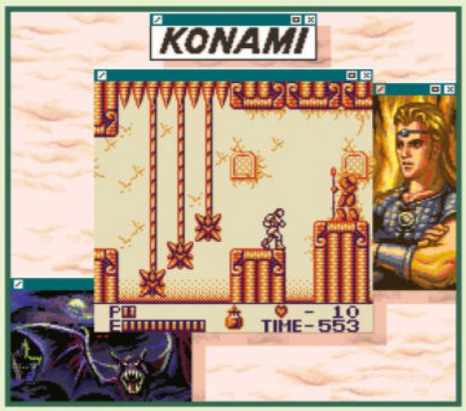
It's my magnum opus! But I have to say it only became the highlight of my career around 2010, when a collector found me and informed me about this community of retro gamers. Before that I had no idea this body of work was even noticed. The fact that this community reached out to me is without question the greatest experience of my life since I first saw Talos turn his big iron head. Something deep inside told that wide-eyed kid that thing was going to move.

"THEY WOULD JUST UNLEASH ME AND LET ME GO"

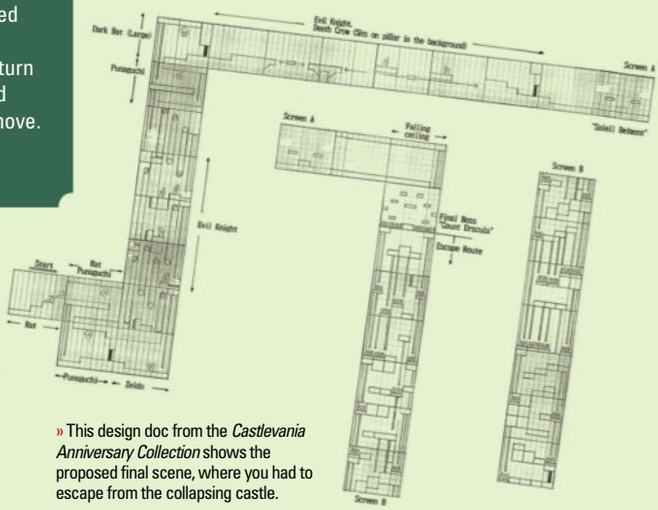




» [Game Boy Color] The European re-release adds a basic colour palette on the GBC, lifting the sprites out of the murk.



» [Super Game Boy] The version included on the Japanese release, *Konami GB Collection Vol 3*, displays a unique border when played on the Super Game Boy.



» This design doc from the *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* shows the proposed final scene, where you had to escape from the collapsing castle.

it was released and raved about it. *Mean Machines* gave it 91%, with Richard Leadbetter commenting, "What a brilliant platform game this is… plenty of levels packed with cunning traps… you'll be playing it time and time again." Elsewhere, *ACE* magazine awarded it 88%, with reviewer David Upchurch seemingly surprised by the game's excellence. "*Castlevania II* mixes quality gameplay with a never-ending stream of challenges that lift the game well out of the mire of the also-rans and into 'must buy' territory," he wrote. "Action games this good are rare, but on the Game Boy they're practically non-existent." One element which most reviewers overlooked at the time was Hidehiro Funauchi's soundtrack, which was wonderful from start to finish and truly added to the atmosphere.

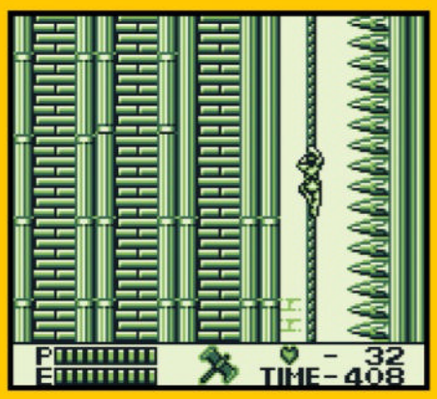
The third game in the series, *Castlevania Legends*, was released for the Game Boy in 1997, and during the same year Konami issued the first of four *Konami GB Collection* carts in Japan. *Volume 1* included *Castlevania: The Adventure*, while *Belmont's Revenge* appeared on *Volume 3*. The game was unchanged bar support for the Super Game Boy, which gave it a red/orange hue and added a full-colour border featuring a picture of Christopher and some bloody vampire bats. The collection was not released in Europe until 2000 (as *Volume 4*, confusingly), by which point it lost Super Game Boy support but happily gained Game Boy Color enhancements instead. The cart still worked on the original hardware, but playing it in colour was the way to go. Interestingly, the update featured the cross sub-weapon rather than the axe (as in the Japanese version), and corrected the 'Soleiyu' mistranslation.

The aforementioned *Castlevania Anniversary Collection*, released for most modern platforms in 2019, features eight games including the first two Game Boy *Castlevania*s (but oddly, not the third). Both the Japanese and Western versions are selectable, so you can choose whether you want to brandish the cross or the axe. Display options are limited though, with you being able to choose between filters that mimic the original Game Boy, Game Boy Pocket and Super Game Boy, but there's no way to select the Game Boy Color palette. Still, it's currently the most convenient, legal way to experience the game, as the original Game Boy release commands a high price these days – and the Konami *GB Collection* it's featured on even more so.

It should be noted that *Castlevania: The Adventure* was remade for the Wii in 2009 as part of M2's *ReBirth* series. To date *Belmont's Revenge* has received no similar treatment, but that's probably because the original is already pretty perfect.

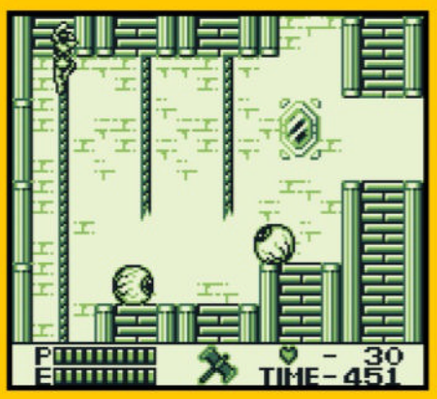
CASTLE MASTER

HOW TO WHIP UP A STORM IN BELMONT'S REVENGE



LET IT SLIDE

■ The speedy rope slide is perhaps the best new techique added to the sequel. Use it to quickly descend ropes when under attack. Crucially, you'll need to use it to pass the six-screen high moving spiky wall in Crystal Castle (pictured).

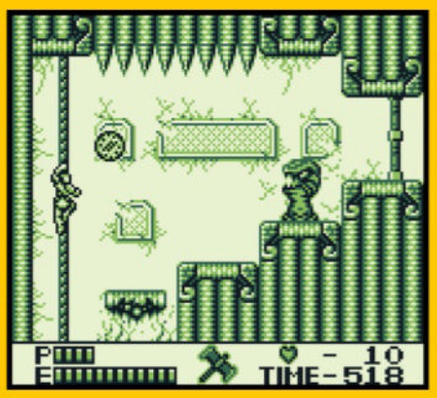


HIDDEN HOLLOWS

■ Each castle is home to concealed areas that are typically found by climbing to the very top of ropes. If you continue through the 'ceiling' you'll find yourself in a secret room that will contain goodies like large hearts and sub-weapons.

BLOCK BUSTER

■ Hearts provide power for your sub-weapons, so you may be wondering where you find health. It's actually hidden in the scenery, so try smashing blocks until you uncover a hunk of meat. If you're lucky you may even score an extra life.

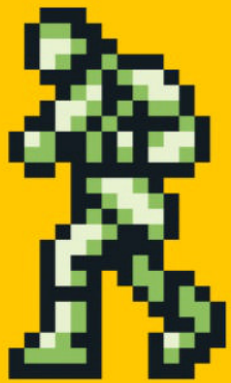


IT'S A STEAL

■ You'll want to avoid all enemies, but two in particular should be given an extra wide berth. The blob-spitting Punaguchi will downgrade your whip on contact, while the jellyfish-like Absorber will steal your hearts (and not in a nice romantic way).

SETTLING THE SCORE

■ Did you know that the game keeps a running score? It's only displayed when you press the Select button to pause the game. This matters because you'll earn an extra life when you reach 20,000 points, and another every 30,000 points thereafter.



Expansion Module #1

» PLATFORM: ColecoVision **» YEAR:** 1983 **» COST:** £59.99 (launch), £70+ (today, boxed), £40+ (today, unboxed)

When launching a new console, leveraging the popularity of existing hardware with backwards compatibility is often a solid strategy. But what if your company doesn't have any existing hardware? Well, if your company is Coleco, you simply borrow the market leader's technology. Since the Atari 2600 only contained one custom chip, the Television Interface Adapter, Coleco reverse-engineered it and created the Expansion Module #1. The stylistically cohesive if slightly bulky extension plugs into the front of the ColecoVision and allows players to play Atari 2600 games. The host console provides little more than power and display output, and the accessory even has its own joystick ports.

Atari was none too happy about this spectacularly bold move, especially as the Atari 5200 had launched without backwards compatibility, and it launched legal action against Coleco. The matter was quickly settled, with the two companies entering into a licensing agreement – Coleco would continue to manufacture the Expansion Module #1, and Atari would take a cut of the sales. It didn't matter for long though, as the North American market crash caused Coleco to abandon videogames by 1985.

Expansion Module #1 fact

■ The licensing agreement that enabled Coleco to continue manufacturing the Expansion Module #1 also allowed it to produce and market the Gemini, an Atari 2600 clone console.

ESSENTIAL GAME

JOUST

The primary appeal of the ColecoVision was its library of high-quality arcade conversions, and Atari actually supplied a few of them including *Centipede*, *Defender* and *Galaxian*. Unfortunately, Atari never brought *Joust* to Coleco's console despite having the home-console rights. Fortunately, the Atari 2600 version of the game is very good, conveying all the thrills of deadly duels on flying steeds with minimal changes from the arcade original. It won't look as good as a native ColecoVision version, but we'd rather have this version than no *Joust* at all.

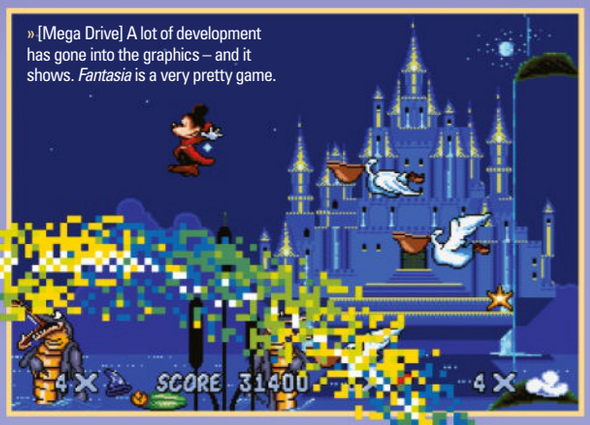
SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

THE STORY OF Fantasia

THE DISNEY PLATFORMERS OF THE EARLY NINETIES ARE USUALLY HEAPED WITH PRAISE, WITH TITLES SUCH AS CASTLE OF ILLUSION, QUACKSHOT AND ALADDIN STILL STANDING OUT TODAY. IT'S EASY TO FORGET, THOUGH, THAT NOT EVERYTHING THAT LEFT THE HOUSE OF MOUSE BACK THEN WAS AUTOMATICALLY EXCELLENT...

WORDS BY PAUL KAUTZ

While the Apprentice Sorcerer slept
his master's music was stolen away .
Now his dreams must restore the notes
so the music again can play .



» [Mega Drive] A lot of development has gone into the graphics – and it shows. *Fantasia* is a very pretty game.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** INFOGRAMES
- **RELEASED:** 1991
- **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

To this day, *Fantasia* is probably the most un-Disney Disney film ever made. What was shown in selected American cinemas in November 1940 was unlike anything else at the time. No cartoons, no slapstick, no southern drama, no cowboys – instead classical masterpieces such as Johann Sebastian Bach's *Toccata And Fugue In D Minor*, Modest Mussorgsky's *Night On Bald Mountain* and Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria* featured. It was spectacularly performed by more than a hundred members of the Philadelphia Orchestra under Maestro Leopold Stokowski, in unprecedented sound quality, and accompanied by absolutely fantastic images, whose brilliant animations are precisely synchronised to the music. With his third major animated film, Walt Disney intended to bring the beauty of classical music to the masses, tell stories exclusively in pictures and sound, and make going to the cinema a unique experience. It was a ridiculously ambitious project into which Disney himself had poured years of his life and all of his heart and soul – and which almost ruined the company when it flopped mercilessly at the box office.

Over the course of the following years, the film became a cult classic while Disney grew into a global powerhouse. A good 50 years after its premiere, *Fantasia* was finally ready to enter home cinemas – and an official game was planned to hit the shops at the same time. As the Disney licence was currently held by Sega, it would have made sense for the game to be created by Emiko Yamamoto and her team, who had already proven a year earlier with the excellent *Castle Of Illusion* that they knew exactly what to do with such an important licence. At the time, however, they were busy working on the quasi-sequel *Quackshot* and simply had no time for *Fantasia*.

And so, the contract was awarded to... Infogrames. According to Scott Berfield, the producer in charge of Disney games at Sega at the time, this was largely due to that company's boss. "Once we had the licence, we put out a request for proposals to a few people, and Bruno Bonnell at Infogrames convinced the company

SCOTT BERFIELD

» Scott was *Fantasia*'s producer for Sega Of America. After a long career in the games industry he is now retired.

that they could do the work." He must have been very persuasive, because Infogrames had previously been known for more modest projects on PCs and home computers, had never developed for a console, and had also never developed for a brand as well-known as Disney. What's more, the film was an audiovisual behemoth – and the Mega Drive couldn't begin to match the graphics or sound of the big screen. It was a truly hellish task for the development team of just nine people, led by Didier Chanfray.

It's no wonder then that work on the game was rushed and chaotic. "The schedule was quite short and while Infogrames had a really good art department, they did not have much experience with the Mega Drive or with doing platform games," says Scott. "One incident I recall was when we were coming up on the final deadline – only a few weeks to go – and one of the senior people at Infogrames told my boss and me that we shouldn't worry because they, 'Had everything done but the gameplay.' It was also a real struggle to come up with game mechanics that Disney would approve given their reverence for Mickey and the *Fantasia* property. The last three weeks of the project, we had the Infogrames team in the US working at our offices in South San Francisco so we could have them working closely with me and the test team to lock it all down. We had a hard deadline to get the code to Japan for manufacture to be able to make the holiday shipping requirement and we barely made the date. I even manually edited some of the hex code in the ROM to get it ready to send at the end of the very last day we had, because the developers had already gone home to France."

» [Mega Drive] The sluggish and unreliable controls are one of *Fantasia*'s biggest problems.

> "IT WAS A REAL STRUGGLE TO COME UP WITH GAME MECHANICS THAT DISNEY WOULD APPROVE GIVEN THEIR REVERENCE FOR MICKEY AND THE FANTASIA PROPERTY"
> SCOTT BERFIELD

The reason for the frenetic pace was that the game had to be in stores in time for the 1991 Christmas season – a date that was less than six months away when development started. Unsurprisingly, Didier doesn't have the best memories of that time, "It was the first time we made a game on the Mega Drive. Our programmers did not know the machine. Production time was very short, even for the time. I have only a vague memory of the assembly of the game, the playtest, the settings, because I think there was practically none. For my part, I was very busy producing the graphic assets of the game and managing the artistic team and I admit that I did not test the game enough during its design. Certainly we realised that ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ALONE IN THE DARK
RELEASED: 1992
PLATFORM: PC, VARIOUS

LITTLE BIG ADVENTURE (PICTURED)
RELEASED: 1994
PLATFORM: PC, VARIOUS

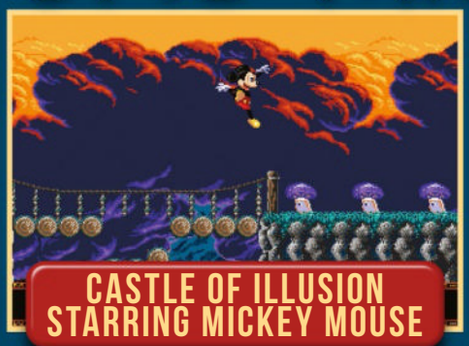
TOY COMMANDER
RELEASED: 1999
PLATFORM: DREAMCAST

DIDIER CHANFRAY

» Didier was *Fantasia*'s designer and art director. He works now at 2.21, bringing *Little Big Adventure* back to life.

EPIC MICKEY

MORE MEGA DRIVE MOUSECAPADES



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE

■ This was the stunning first result of the Sega/Disney collaboration of the early Nineties. Emiko Yamamoto's platformer looks wonderful, sounds wonderful and is still wonderful to play. A great (some would argue better) Master System/Game Gear version followed in 1991, as did several more *Illusion* games over the years, as well as a lovely remake in 2013.

WORLD OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE AND DONALD DUCK

■ Emiko Yamamoto strikes back. Two years after the original *Castle Of Illusion*, Sega partnered Mickey Mouse up with Donald Duck and created a gorgeous game worthy of the *Illusion* name, that changed its level design depending on which character(s) you played it with.

MICKEY MANIA: THE TIMELESS ADVENTURES OF MICKEY MOUSE

■ Before it became known for its Lego games, Traveller's Tales created games like *Mickey Mania* – one of the best-looking platformers of the 16-bit era. *Mickey Mania* took the hero through seven of his most popular cartoons, including *Steamboat Willie* and *The Mad Doctor*. The Mega Drive version in particular was a technical marvel.

» [Mega Drive] The enemies are all familiar from the film. Even characters who only made tiny appearances in the film are here.

THE MOUSE IS MISSING

WHY FANTASIA WAS PULLED FROM THE STORES

Fantasia was pulled from the market just a few weeks after its launch. The reason? The ghost of Walt Disney! During his lifetime, he had given the order that *Fantasia* must never be transferred to any medium other than film – but neither Infogrames nor Sega knew about this. It was only when Walt's nephew Roy Disney, who had taken over the company in the late-Sixties, was told that there was a game based on the film, and went ballistic, that this was changed. *Fantasia*'s entire advertising campaign was withdrawn, all unsold copies of the game were removed from stores and physically destroyed.

The real reason for that recall was never made public in an official capacity. There were even instructions to give a faulty game module or a game-breaking bug discovered too late as the reason if a retailer asked. Not even the game's developers were told the truth at the time. "I have heard this myself, but I honestly don't know the details. I believe there was some mix up at Disney about who actually had the rights to the property. It was not anything on the Sega side," Scott told us. "At the time I didn't know it. I only learned it much later," confirms Didier. At least, Sega was well compensated for its losses, as Disney acknowledged the error on its end.

» [Mega Drive] The design of the levels follows the motifs of the film.

"YOU REALLY SHOULD NOT RELEASE A GAME WHEN IT IS NOT FINISHED"
DIDIER CHANFRAY

it was unplayable, but there was always the hope of improving our work before we had to deliver the final master."

Somehow *Fantasia* found its way into stores and was released almost simultaneously in the US, Europe and Japan in November 1991. Since the film didn't have a plot to speak of, the team had to come up with one for the game. The new story was explained to you as you started *Fantasia*, "While the Apprentice Sorcerer slept, his master's music was stolen away. Now his dreams must restore the notes so the music again can play."

Mickey's sleepwalk takes place over 20 levels spread across four worlds. Each world follows a different visual and musical theme from the film: the Water World features Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the Earth World Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring*, the Air World Ludwig van Beethoven's *Pastoral*, while the Fire World is centred around Modest Mussorgsky's famous *Night On Bald Mountain*. Of course, the Mega Drive couldn't exactly match the acoustic force of a 100-piece orchestra. And you have to give musician Frédéric Mentzen credit for incorporating the pieces in a way that makes them at least halfway recognisable. But it still doesn't sound good.

» [Mega Drive] Mickey can use weak magic, strong magic and well-aimed jumps to defeat his many enemies.

» [Mega Drive] Most of the levels scroll horizontally, while some are very vertical.

Mickey's main task is to find his master's music, in the form of blue notes, which the wind scattered throughout the levels. At the end of each world, Mickey enters an orchestra pit and throws the notes he found into the air. If he has found enough, he is allowed to move on to the next section; if not, he has to repeat the level. Incidentally, the game does not tell you how many notes you need – for that information you have to consult the manual.

To make matters worse, the controls are a complete disaster: Mickey moves with the speed and flexibility of a bulldozer, every single jump is not only incredibly sluggish, but also happens with a noticeable delay. Add to this the sloppy collision detection, the sometimes absurd number of enemies, Mickey's rapid loss of energy when hit, the unpredictable jumps and the lack of checkpoints within levels, and you have a game that quickly becomes maddeningly frustrating and has absolutely nothing to do with the lightheartedness and elegance of *Castle Of Illusion* – even though *Fantasia* was described as the direct successor to that game in its American advertising.

Thankfully, the game shines when it comes to its graphics, which don't quite reach the level of Disney's better-known games, but aren't that far off either. No wonder, since according to Didier, his graphics team alone consisted of six people, "I was responsible for graphic production. We were six to draw and animate the whole game, three professionals and three trainees. I took care in particular of the animation of Mickey, the design of the levels, the finale and the menus." The results speak for themselves as *Fantasia* boasts great backgrounds, slick animation, rich colours and imaginatively designed and well-animated characters – clearly, a lot of work has gone into *Fantasia*'s look.

And it was also the reason why the reviewers back then had at least some positive things to say about the game: in *Mean Machines*, for example, *Fantasia*'s graphics were praised, while the gameplay was slammed – the final score was 61%. A similar result emerged in the *CVG* review, where the score was only 53. *Fantasia* fared even worse in *MegaTech*'s debut issue. It scored just 49% and was described as, "This sequel to *Mickey Mouse* was keenly anticipated, but turned out to be a massive disappointment. The graphics are excellent, but sadly naff sound and poorly designed, bland and frustrating gameplay result in a game that has very little appeal – even to the biggest Mickey fans."

» [Mega Drive] *Fantasia* can be absurdly difficult. Bizarrely enough, you can only decrease the number of Dreams and continues.

» [Mega Drive] You have to find a certain amount of blue notes in each level, otherwise you have to repeat it.

» [Mega Drive] Mickey doesn't have Lives, he has Dreams. This was a requirement from Disney, who tried to avoid any association with death.

» [Mega Drive] In the hellish final world, the difficulty increases dramatically.

Despite all its problems and poor reviews, *Fantasia* sold quite well at first. However, it disappeared from stores just a few weeks after its release – the reasons for which you will find in The Mouse Is Missing panel. The game was also not converted to the Master System or Game Gear, as was common at the time, "We were rapidly moving away from the Master System by then," Scott tells us. "We knew the game wasn't as good as it could be and we only wanted to port big sellers to Game Gear." Much later, Sorcerer's Apprentice Mickey returned with a guest appearance in *Disney Infinity* (2013) and *Fantasia: Music Evolved* (2014), while the *Kingdom Hearts* series contains various *Fantasia* elements. The Mega Drive game, however, disappeared forever.

Which is a shame in a way, because the original idea of a game based on such a spectacular film was a very welcome one. But as is so often the case, chaotic planning and a far too short development cycle led to a result that, in retrospect, not even its creators are really proud of. "I think the graphics hold up and the music is about as good as it could have been given the limited hardware. I do wish we could have made it more fun though," Scott says. Didier has similar feelings about the game, "I haven't played *Fantasia* for at least 25 years. But I never forgot the awful sluggish controls and the randomness of the collisions. My point of view today? You really should not release a game when it is not finished."

CLASSIC MOMENTS

The Chaos Engine

» **PLATFORM:** AMIGA » **RELEASED:** 1993 » **DEVELOPER:** THE BITMAP BROTHERS

t's fair to describe *The Chaos Engine* as a little unforgiving, and this becomes apparent soon after leaving its character selection screen. As you might expect, all six of the mercenaries you can play as or partner with start with less than optimal capabilities in one or more areas, which means that you're in for a challenging opening level regardless of your choices. As you enter the first stage's wooded maze, merciless robotic opponents fire upon the pair of you from all sides. While you're dodging their ammo and taking them out, you also need to search for cash and other useful collectables. You additionally have to activate satellite dish-like nodes by blasting shells into them, and of course you have to navigate your way through the dense forestry all around you. Achieving all of this ultimately brings you to a bridge leading to an exit armed by droids. Once you've taken care of these, you get to triumphantly fire two nodes into life before a moment of calm as you hit the exit having survived the game's opening salvo.

BIO

Developed by a team of The Bitmap Brothers' creatives including Mike Montgomery and Eric Mathews, *The Chaos Engine* looked to William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's seminal steampunk novel *The Difference Engine* for its plot and Victorian-tech aesthetics. Praised for its emphasis on exploration and character building as much for its shoot-'em-up elements, *The Chaos Engine* also won plaudits for tasking players with character development. Versions were first released for the vanilla and AGA Amiga, before its success on those machines led to it being ported to a number of other systems.

MORE CLASSIC THE CHAOS ENGINE MOMENTS

Fortunate Find

The Chaos Engine's protagonists have a secondary weapon, ability or item, but they don't work without a special power pick-up. So finding one when your character's hidden talent has some offensive capability is a real boon when you're under fire.

Boom Or Bust

Of all the collectables in *The Chaos Engine*, the dynamite is the best. That's as long as an enemy doesn't shoot it before you pick it up. If so, only that foe gets blown-up. Otherwise, it takes out every opponent on the screen when it's deployed!

Clever Cornering

The Preacher isn't one of *The Chaos Engine*'s most obvious mercenaries to pick as your AI partner, as he lacks firepower and durability. But unlike his counterparts, he goes after enemies lurking around corners, and he's great at dodging bullets.

Character Building

It may seem like a chore finding every last coin and blasting every last foe to get the money they drop, but there's a pay-off. Between levels you can buy character stat upgrades, so the more cash you get the more you can improve your character.

THE MAKING OF alpha storm

GALACTIC PIRACY, CANNIBALISING SPACECRAFT AND FIGHTING OUTLANDISH ENEMIES IN A DOOM-STYLE ENVIRONMENT USING PSEUDO-3D TECH FROM THE LATE-NINETIES. IT'S TIME TO DISCOVER THE STORY BEHIND A LITTLE KNOWN AND UNDER-APPRECIATED PSYGNOSIS PC GAME FROM THE TEAM THAT CREATED BLOODWYCH. PREPARE TO ENTER THE STORM...

WORDS BY RICHARD C HEWISON

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** PSYGNOSIS
- **DEVELOPER:** ANTHONY TAGLIONE, PETER JAMES, PHILIP TAGLIONE
- **RELEASED:** 1997
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** 3D ARCADE STRATEGY

In the late-Eighties and early Nineties, Anthony Taglione and Peter James collaborated on successful fantasy RPGs *Bloodwych* and *Legend*, but computer hardware and software was moving on at a rapid pace. The release of *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* from Origin Systems and *Wolfenstein 3D* from id Software in 1992 opened up new gaming environments for players with a suitably powerful PC, and id's real game-changer *Doom* was still over a year away from its shareware debut. "I remember when we first saw those games and Anthony said, 'I can do that.' His grasp and understanding of the maths needed is genius," explains Peter.

A trip to a spring 1993 trade show in London gave them the perfect opportunity to develop their own pseudo-3D engine, as Peter explains. "Our publisher was having problems with distribution in the US. So, at the European Computer Trade Show we spent more time chatting with Mike Simpson at the nearby Psygnosis stand, and that's how we ended up working for them."

Psygnosis was on the verge of being bought by Sony Electronic Publishing, and at the Crinan Street office in London, Mike Simpson hatched a plan using the development team he had previously worked with at Mirrorsoft. Anthony and Peter embarked on a new PC game called *Wizard!*, covertly reimagining their *Bloodwych* RPG using the 3D engine that Anthony had recently devised.

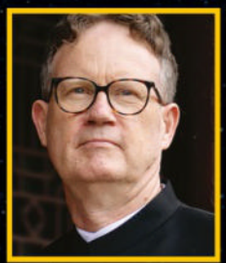
After a brief and frantic diversion to produce the *Bram Stoker's Dracula* PC game in late-summer 1993, *Wizard!* was completed nine months later, but only after a very late change of name to *Hexx: Heresy Of The Wizard*, as Anthony tells us in what would sadly be his last interview. "The people who produced *Wizardry* in the US persuaded Psygnosis to change the name, and so we lost out on much of the pre-release hype. Not an ideal situation."

> "I HAD TO REMIND THEM THAT WE WERE MEANT TO BE GETTING ALPHA STORM FINISHED" PETER JAMES

Unperturbed, with two pseudo-3D games already produced in barely twelve months, the team immediately embarked on another project for Psygnosis, based on *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons the *Frankenstein* game was cancelled soon after it started. However, Mike felt confident that they could squeeze out another title, this time with the focus on a science fiction rather than a gothic horror or fantasy setting. "At the time I was working on a Psygnosis PC project based on the *Spawn* comic book which eventually became a game called *Bedlam*," recalls Anthony. "But I dropped that once *Alpha Storm* got under way."

Anthony, his brother Philip, and Peter James were all based in West Yorkshire, where Anthony and Philip grew up. Under Sony ownership Psygnosis had set up

» Anthony Taglione and Peter James posing for a publicity shoot in 1989. They collaborated on eight original games in total.



» Mike Simpson worked with Anthony on six different projects for Mirrorsoft, Psygnosis and Creative Assembly.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

DEATHSCAPE (PICTURED)
RELEASED: 1987
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM

BLOODWYCH
RELEASED: 1989-1991
PLATFORM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS

LEGEND
RELEASED: 1992
PLATFORM: ATARI ST, AMIGA, PC

» [C64] Anthony and Peter's popular split-screen two-player RPG *Bloodwych*.

» [PC] *Hexx* gave Anthony and Peter the chance to reimagine *Bloodwych* in pseudo-3D.

» [PC] Space battles in *Alpha Storm*. Do you deal a fatal blow or board the defeated ship?

» [PC] The Vargs that first appeared in *Deathscape* returned to battle with mankind again.

» [PC] It's really hard not to press that blue button and see what it does.

several satellite development offices around the UK, including one in Leeds. "We became an Ilkley annex of Psygnosis for a while," says Anthony. "Pete and Philip joined the Leeds team, although they continued to work with me on *Alpha Storm*. Psygnosis basically bought out their share and loaned their services back to me during the game's development."

Peter also remembers the rather unusual arrangement they had with Psygnosis for his and Philip's involvement in *Alpha Storm*, and the problems it caused. "We had an office that Philip and I rented from a builder in Ilkley, and we worked on *Alpha Storm* from there. I would get phone calls from the Leeds office asking why I wasn't working there, and I had to remind them that we were meant to be getting *Alpha Storm* finished. It was a very weird situation," says Peter laughing at the memory. "We were really only working there for a matter of months."

"One day I borrowed all the machines from their office, took them home and networked them to run a huge batch processing of animations," says Anthony. "I had intended to get them back to the office before Pete and Philip turned up to work but I fell asleep and the next thing I knew, the pair of them were hammering on my door asking where their kit had disappeared to!"

During development, Anthony also took the opportunity to improve his game engine even more. First to go were the rectilinear maps and fake stairs. "I'd expanded the engine into having more 3D aspects, such as lifts and ledges, where *Hexx* and *Dracula* had purely 2D maps drawn in 3D," explains Anthony. The game could also now be configured to run in VGA, a hybrid VGA/SVGA display, or be fully SVGA on a decently equipped PC. Philip set about writing a vector-based

BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA

THE CATCH 22 DAYS PROBLEM

Thanks to its Sony connections, Psygnosis got a Colombia Pictures film licence deal for the Francis Ford Coppola blockbuster *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, but time was against it. For consoles and other platforms, a horizontally scrolling fighting game was developed, but that wasn't suitable for the PC market. Anthony and Peter were temporarily diverted away from their pre-*Alpha Storm* game *Wizard!* toward a dark gothic pseudo-3D game set in the world of Dracula and his menagerie of terrifying creatures.

"*Bram Stoker's Dracula* may well be the fastest-developed commercial game ever, with just three weeks and a day passing between my call and his delivery of the master version," explains producer Mike Simpson. "Anthony ingeniously utilised code from one game and maps from another to assemble an affordable, cheerful FPS that, while not outstanding, was far from terrible and precisely filled the gap the publisher wanted to address."

"*Dracula* was intended to be a cheap and cheerful budget title," adds Anthony. "So, I put in around six hours of gameplay, longer if you played it more casually, but the premise was that it was going to be sold as an impulse purchase. Unfortunately, Psygnosis put it out at a higher price point and so it took some negative flack for being overpriced."

» [PC] Battling the eponymous Count Dracula in his human form.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

THE PERILS OF DEVELOPING GAMES SOFTWARE

Before Anthony started on *Alpha Storm*, he had been working on a PC game based on the *Spawn* comic book, by Todd McFarlane. "Spawn was for the Psygnosis London office," says Anthony. "I was the off-site lead, and I wrote some code to take a rendered image and its z-map and from those identify floors and obstacles. The images that still linger in my memory are of the inside of an insane asylum."

For reasons long since forgotten, *Spawn* was repurposed into another game called *Bedlam*, which remains one of a small handful of unfinished titles in Anthony's back catalogue, including the Spectrum conversion of Firebird's *Star Trek: The Rebel Universe* (cancelled when the platform was no longer commercially viable), a Nintendo GBA version of his and Peter James' isometric RPG *Legend*, and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

"I remember working on *Frankenstein*," adds Peter. "I'd made a start on some rudimentary graphics and a communication system which was borrowed from *Bloodwych* to generate replies to player questions, selected from a list. We had a pixelated Robert De Niro's monster suffering bun-related innuendos from a village baker at one stage! The comms system was displayed in a bog-standard player portrait on the left, text in the middle and an NPC image on the right."

Zoth Runecaster
A Level 7 Runemaster
Experience: 100094
Af: 91 Df: 74 Ac: +2
Str 11 Wis 16 Spd 12
Dex 14 Vit 10 Lck 1
Hits 2/322 Gold 1765
Chaos Helm

» [Game Boy Advance] A rare glimpse of the unreleased *Legend* GBA conversion

map editor, and Peter got to work on the graphics and other design elements.

"The way we worked as a team was that I would do the maps, and then Anthony would come in later and add all the puzzles, but there were less puzzle elements in *Alpha Storm* compared to our earlier games," says Peter. "The gameplay was a little more like *Doom* where you went from one ship location to another, trying to find the right keys to open up the right doors, and then battle the enemies, that kind of thing. The space battles we ended up with were a little simplistic, but they did the job."

» [PC] Proper 3D or not, stairs in a spaceship still aren't very accessible.

Travelling around the solar system in a borrowed prototype starship, disabling enemy ships then boarding them to cannibalise parts to upgrade your ship's capabilities gave the player plenty to do whilst searching for weapon parts on planetary bases. As for the adversaries, there were humanoid space pirates and Imperials, reptilian Vargs (making a return appearance after featuring in Anthony and Peter's Spectrum shooter *Deathscape*), and the sinister Dark Beings to contend with. Of course, if the enemy reduced the player's shields, then they would either destroy them – definitely game over – or they would have to repel the invading hoards from the confines of their own ship.

Players of Antony and Peter's previous games would have spotted several recognisable items and locations in *Alpha Storm*, including solar systems named Brodfird (Bradford), Goriah and Pongbarn (Pangbourne, Berkshire), with all three names having first made their appearance in *Legend* as towns to visit on the game map. Some recognisable Futhark-inspired runes first used in *Legend* also appeared, and a few other more obviously jokey references included solar system names like Quaggle Frack (*Fraggle Rock*), Mors Minoris (Morris Minor), and Bathos Khan (*The Wrath Of Khan*). "The star names were mostly made up by Pete and me," says Anthony. "Some were reminiscent of the kind of name that Larry Niven might have used in his novels, others were reused from

> "THE NEXT THING I KNEW, THE PAIR OF THEM WERE HAMMERING ON MY DOOR"
> ANTHONY TAGLIONE

» [PC] It's all going to pot after the destruction of Hell's Kitchen.

» [PC] You don't usually see doors like that in a spaceship!

Legend. Ghothobaed Nau was added late one night because it was similar to 'go to bed now.'"

The trio had all been tabletop RPG players in their youth, and so the fantasy elements of their game design had the player running around with a weapon that looked like a flaming green sword in one hand, whilst shooting energy bolts from the other, using Psionic powers fuelled by Mana. *Alpha Storm* also contained several recognisable nods to popular science fiction programmes and movies. Boarding a ship only once their shields had been disabled echoed *Star Trek*, as did the use of stable wormholes to travel quickly around the galaxy. The teleport system that allowed the player to board other ships had more than a touch of *Blakes 7* to it, complete with shimmering visuals and a recognisable sound effect as the teleport was engaged. "Maybe there were aspects which might have subconsciously been derived from those shows but none deliberately so. Obviously, we'd all watched them," admits Anthony.

Engaging with the enemy meant traversing the solar system looking for enemy ships to fight. This was achieved by running around their prototype spacecraft, accessing computer terminals and plotting a course to intercept. The space battles were fairly simplistic, but once the enemy ship's shields were down you either followed through and blew them up, or hot-footed it to your ship's teleporter and beamed over to battle the enemy at close quarters on their own territory. "The Psygnosis London office did the animation sequences for the combat vignettes," remembers Anthony. "I used their rendered animations, although they were rather tiny, so I expanded them vertically, adding a black line on every other scanline."

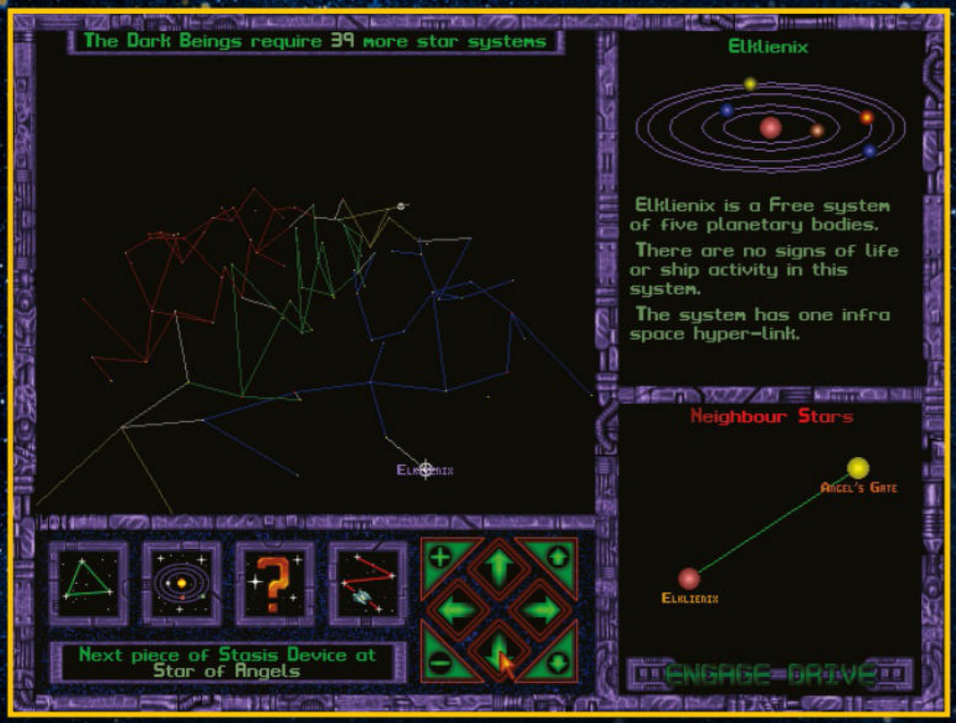
Anthony recalls Philip particularly enjoying building the editor tool which they used extensively to create the maps for the various spacecraft and levels in the game.

» [PC] A selection of ships and locations that can be found in *Alpha Storm*.

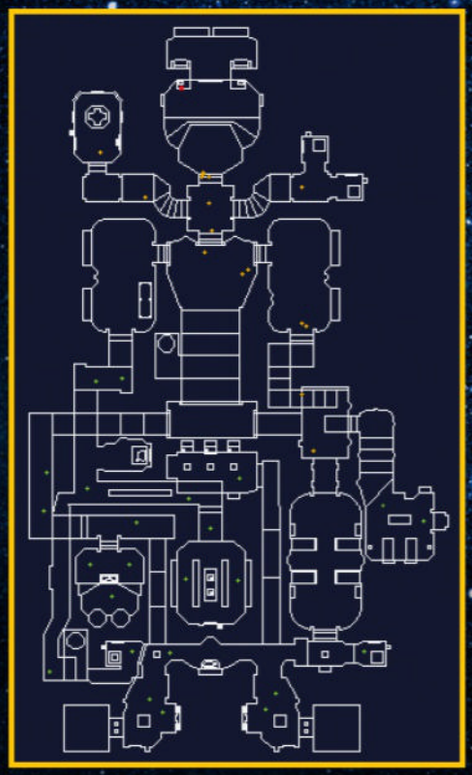
» [PC] Now's your chance to steal the Shields component from the enemy ship.

» [PC] MegaRoo was an in-joke reference to a platformer Anthony and Peter had briefly considered.

» [PC] Use the teleporter to board the enemy's spaceship, but only after disabling their shields.


The Dark Beings require 39 more star systems
Elklienix
Elklienix is a Free system of five planetary bodies.
There are no signs of life or ship activity in this system.
The system has one infra space hyper-link.
Neighbour Stars
Angel's Gate
Elklienix
Next piece of Stasis Device at Star of Angels
ENGAGE-DRIVE

» [PC] At the start, the Dark Beings need to invade 39 more star systems for victory.



» [PC] A typical in-game map, showing the interior of an Imperial Scout Ship.

The maps were also displayed in-game, accessible via another computer terminal as the player explored the ship.

Unfortunately, whilst Psygnosis had been a big player in the earliest days of 16-bit computing, the significance of the brand name on home-computer formats was slowly dwindling after Sony's acquisition in 1993. Psygnosis were instrumental in developing early PlayStation successes, but upheaval behind the scenes gave the team a serious cause for concern. "Our game was mostly written during a time of large-scale changes at Psygnosis," says Anthony. "We lost our main sponsor when Mike Simpson left, and it felt like we became just another project to get out of the door. We also lost a lot of the promised graphical support that we'd been expecting from Mike's team in London, and the game suffered because of it."

"They had a group of 3D artists, who were going to do all the cutscenes and the rendered sprites," adds Peter. "The wandering adversaries were bitmap sprites laid on top of the pseudo-3D backgrounds. Everything else you see in the game was done by us, including the tactical displays, the HUDs... everything else really."

» [PC] Post-*Alpha Storm*, Anthony helped give birth to the *Total War* PC strategy series

And what about the eponymous *Alpha Storm*? There's nothing about a storm in the game or in the manual backstory, but Peter remembers that the name was decided long before the game design was formed. "It was always going to be called *Alpha Storm*," says Peter. "As you say, it never featured in the game itself, but it was a cool-sounding name which is why we chose it."

> "THERE WERE LESS PUZZLE ELEMENTS IN ALPHA STORM COMPARED TO OUR EARLIER GAMES" PETER JAMES

The change in circumstances meant the scope of the game had to be scaled back and other drastic alterations made to reduce development time. *Alpha Storm* was mastered in early 1997 when neither Anthony, Peter nor Philip considered it ready, and it became apparent to them that their publisher's focus lay elsewhere. The expected Psygnosis branding was missing from the box, and the Psygnosis name only appeared in copyright statements in the manual. There was also little to no marketing on release, which obviously had a detrimental impact on its chances of success at a time when most new PC titles from the publisher were conversions of proven PlayStation console games. With *Alpha Storm* released with little fanfare, the lack of drive from their publisher had a demoralising effect on Anthony. "We never looked at *Alpha Storm* again afterwards, which was very unusual for us. Ordinarily, we'd play our own games for a long while after they were completed."

Once *Alpha Storm* was finished, Philip and Peter remained at the Psygnosis Leeds office. Although they didn't know it at the time, *Alpha Storm* marked the end of their close working relationship that had endured for a decade. "After *Alpha Storm*, I went into a hiatus which only a holiday could resolve," remembers Anthony. "My trip to Australia had me writing much more generic 3D routines and when I got back to England I sent a demo to Mike Simpson who was by then working with Tim Ansell at Creative Assembly," says Anthony. "They needed a 3D programmer, and this resulted in me driving down to Brighton to join them on my 40th birthday."

And what was the 3D project that Anthony began working on? "It became *Shogun*, and it started the *Total War* series on PC," he concludes. Not a bad project for Anthony's first ever salaried employment in an industry he had worked in for nearly 20 years. And whilst Anthony went off to start an epic game series that is still going strong today, Peter and Philip remained at the Sony Leeds office, and the team there produced some award-winning titles. "The Leeds office was really strong for three or four years after," says Peter. "We did the *Colony Wars* sequel, and *WipEout 3* at the tail-end of the PlayStation 1 period."

It might have been the end of one era for the trio, but they all moved on to successful projects afterwards, so *Alpha Storm* remains a bitter-sweet memory. "We could have done with another year of development and five more people," concludes Peter wistfully. "If we had, then it would have been awesome! It wasn't that it was buggy, but it was rushed at the end, and it really needed a bit more polish." ✱

OBITUARY ANTHONY TAGLIONE

WE LOOK AT THE LEGACY OF THE TALENTED CODER

» [PC] Anthony's first ever PC project was to convert Tony Crowther's *Captive*.

■ As this article was being finished, Anthony Taglione unexpectedly passed away in December 2023. Our condolences go out to his friends and family.

Anthony's games development adventure began alongside his brother Philip (who passed in June 2019), and their neighbour Tim Walter. After early coding experiments on a programmable calculator in the mid-Seventies, Tim and Philip wrote a version of *Moon Cresta* for the ZX Spectrum. Anthony introduced them to Incentive Software in Reading, where he was at university. Incentive signed *Moon Cresta*, and Anthony helped write some of the conversions.

» Anthony co-created several conversions for Beyond Software, including *Spy Vs Spy* and *The Lords Of Midnight*.

Anthony created the PowerLoad and PowerLoad 64 tape loading schemes and worked with Malcolm Hellon as Tag & The Kid, writing the ZX Spectrum conversion of First Star's *Spy Vs Spy* and the Commodore 64 conversion of Mike Singleton's *The Lords Of Midnight*. Other ZX Spectrum conversions then followed, all for Beyond Software.

In 1987 Anthony, Philip, and Tim Walter formed Starlight Software with ex-Beyond manager Francis Lee. Unfortunately, the venture failed when their distribution partner Ariolasoft pulled out. Anthony began working with close friend Peter James on the two-player RPG dungeon crawler *Bloodwych* soon afterwards, published by Image Works across multiple formats, with Philip writing the Z80 conversions.

Peter and Anthony created the RPGs *Legend* and *Son Of The Empire* published by Mindscape UK, and Anthony quickly learned PC development by converting Antony Crowther's Captive before embarking with Peter on *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Hexx* and *Alpha Storm* for Psygnosis. "I was just 17 when we first met," explains Peter. "He loomed into my orbit while I was beginning my own journey at Incentive Software, a towering giant who eclipsed all I thought I knew. His reputation as a genius programmer was already established, and I had the great fortune of becoming his development partner over the next ten years. We worked on many games, *Bloodwych* and *Legend* being the two most enduring standouts. More importantly, he was my friend. There was once an article written about us, where it wrongly said that we were brothers. Very funny, how we all laughed. Except that it wasn't wrong. Tag was my friend, my brother, a once in a generation, irreplaceable loss."

In the late-Nineties, Anthony reunited with producer Mike Simpson at Creative Assembly on the inaugural *Shogun* and Mediaeval entries in the *Total War* series. "Anthony was one of the UK game industry's pioneers, and I had the pleasure of producing many of his games," says Mike. "He was not only a great designer but also a razor-sharp coder, and some of my fondest memories from the early days involve working with him. I would often drive up to Yorkshire to visit him, and after a day's work, we'd play multiplayer games sometimes all night long. *Doom* and later *Quake* were favourites, but for some reason *Joust* was also a regular. His work on *Shogun: Total War* brought a distinctive feature to the series. Initially envisioned as a *Command & Conquer* clone, the introduction of 3D cards and his astute mathematical skills transformed the game. He enabled a spline-based landscape, viewed from the general's perspective, with rolling hills – an industry first. Coupled with this was assembly language code for managing troops with incredible efficiency, allowing the game to display, animate, move, and path-find thousands of soldiers on mid-Nineties-era PCs that had a fraction of the computing power of today's machines. That innovation, 25 years later, remains unconquered."

"I was sad to hear of the passing of my old friends," adds Tim Walter. "We had many good years, so much fun. We packed a lot into the short time we had, we worked really hard, but we all loved what we were doing, and we were pioneers. Videogames didn't exist when we were kids, the whole industry has grown and we grew up with it, and helped it grow. Anthony and Philip Taglione, the best, smartest people I've known."

Richard Hewison was producer on various conversions of *Bloodwych*, tester and manual author for the *Legend* games and tester for *Dracula*, and *Hexx*.

» [Amiga] *Legend* and *Son Of The Empire* were Anthony and Peter's next RPGs after *Bloodwych*.

SCORE 00052900
=01 LV=03

Empire Of Steel

IF JULES VERNE MADE A VIDEOGAME

RETROREVIVAL

» MEGA DRIVE » 1992 » HOT • B

There are a number of things that I always look for in a good shmup – it needs to have great music, good scoring mechanics, interesting play mechanics and a distinctive theme. While *Empire Of Steel* doesn't tick all those boxes, it remains an excellent addition to any Mega Drive collection, particularly if you like more unusual games.

By far one of *Empire Of Steel*'s greatest assets is its wonderful score. Composed by Noriyuki Iwadare, Yoshiaki Kubotera and Isao Mizoguchi it's a wonderful blend of rousing beats and anthem-like medleys that really gets the pulse going as you gun down enemy fighters. Equally stylised is the game's look which is heavily influenced by the steampunk genre. Many of the ships have flapping, wooden wings or are steam-assisted. Innocent-looking windmills suddenly take off and pepper the air with bullets, while gigantic battleships are held aloft in the air by robust propellers. It looked quite unlike any other Mega Drive shooter of the time and it still feels refreshingly unique today.

Mechanically, *Empire Of Steel* isn't quite as rich, but it still manages to do a lot of interesting things. It's possible to fire both forwards and backwards, there's a number of nifty power-ups to master – from lightning bombs to miniature drones – and you can even level-up your ship's firepower over time. It means that there's plenty to keep you busy as you tackle *Empire Of Steel*'s tremendously challenging bosses. From literal floating fortresses to flying submarines and gargantuan blimps, each is incredibly tough to take down and they're accompanied by some wonderfully bizarre audio.

Empire Of Steel (or *Steel Empire* as it's known in the US) has been updated numerous times over the years, from a GBA release in 2004 to a slick 3D offering on 3DS in 2014. More recently a HD version is available on modern consoles in the form of *The Legend Of Steel Empire*, with *Steel Empire Chronicles*, a planned compilation featuring the HD game, the GBA and Mega Drive versions and the rare NES game *Over Horizon*, also in the works. Strictly Limited Games even has a reissue of the Mega Drive game on the way, so if you've ever had an interest in this curious shmup there's never been a better time to investigate it.

HIGH
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PUSH 2P
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ULTIMATE GUIDE

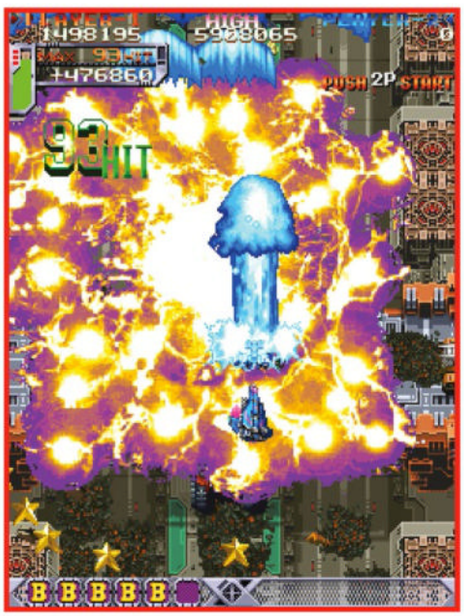
DODONPACHI

CAVE'S DODONPACHI STANDS AS ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC, INFLUENTIAL BULLET HELL SHOOTERS EVER MADE. ITS PURITY AND DEPTH HAVE BEGUILED ARCADE FANS FOR DECADES. TO UNDERSTAND THAT NUANCE DOESN'T JUST UNLOCK ONE OF GAMING'S GREATEST PLEASURES; IT CAN ACCELERATE YOUR JOURNEY TO GENRE MASTERY

WORDS BY WILL FREEMAN

Japanese studio Toaplan famously debuted the concept of bullet hell with its superb 1993 arcade shooter *Batsugun*. Until then, traditional shooting games had been very much calmer, quieter affairs. But while Toaplan's offering enthusiastically suggested the possibilities of increased bullet counts, complexity and mechanical depth, it was CAVE's 1997 arcade release *DoDonPachi* that truly solidified the bullet hell form's potential.

CAVE, established by former Toaplan staff, had already explored bullet hell – or 'danmaku' – with 1995's *DonPachi*. Its sequel however, would establish or refine so many of the tenets that to this day define what bullet hell is, that to better understand how to play *DoDonPachi* is to level up your ability across the genre. And, more importantly, you get to feel the thrill of gradually overcoming one of videogaming's greatest ever examples.



» [Arcade] How your bomb behaves will depend on the shot type you are unleashing when you drop it. Here we see the weaker but generously covering Spread Shot Bomb.

"PLAYING PURELY TO SURVIVE WILL ONLY GET YOU SO FAR"

The fundamentals of playing *DoDonPachi* are in fact entirely conventional to its genre. You dodge bullets while unleashing a torrent of firepower to down enemies large and small, always entirely outnumbered, but never without a chance to survive. Being a bullet hell release from the CAVE stable, however, means going beyond the fundamentals brings a bounty of challenge.

Tucking in, *DoDonPachi* immediately has its first lesson to teach that can be applied to almost the entire genre. Playing purely to survive will only get you so far. Pursuing score as your priority, meanwhile, will not only unlock extra lives that elevate your prospects, but also position you as playing in synchronisation with the rhythm and flow of proceedings.

Out the gate, you'll also want to resist hitting that tempting Continue option, should you run out of lives. It can feel galling at first, but starting the game afresh each time will improve your skills much quicker than the sin of arcade culture known as 'credit feeding'. And if you want to say you've beaten the game, you'll need to do it with a single credit.

Tucking a little further into the nuance, *DoDonPachi* boasts a weapons system now highly common across 2D shooters. Tap the fire button, and you get a wide, weaker spread shot, and fast ship movement. Hold the same button, and you get a strong, needle-like central laser which slows your craft down; the reduced movement rate being better suited for negotiating the densest bullet patterns. With that understood, *DoDonPachi* has taught you another technique that will help you become a better player across the ▶

genre. It's worth noting that through *DoDonPachi*'s arcade and console outings, you are well advised to activate full-auto on what the game usually calls the C-button; that is, a third button you can hold for your spread shot, using a jab of the main fire input to activate the laser. Activate the setting, and you should have an easier time.

> **"TRYING TO GO WITH SMALL, PRECISE MOVEMENTS IS OFTEN THE BEST WAY"**

When you pick any craft – and the blue ship is absolutely the best bet for less experienced players looking to beat the game – you also have to opt to pick between Shot and Laser varieties. Which you pick won't complicate or change the shot behaviours described above. Rather, you can choose whether to opt for a stronger laser in tandem with a weaker spread shot, or vice versa. A few other intricacies are also improved or demeaned by your choice, such as the laser's ability to pierce straight through some enemies into those behind them.

Then comes *DoDonPachi*'s Get Point System, inherited from *DonPachi*, and central to the scoring; and so many shmups that followed. Effectively, if you down enemies back to back, a combo metre builds, climbing with each fresh kill. That multiplier is applied to the score of each enemy, meaning you can cash in huge point values if you build the metre. Your spread shot will easily clear smaller enemies, but for bigger foes, holding the laser on them will also raise the multiplier. Understanding chaining kills will fast track you to those precious extends. But drop the chain for a few seconds, and it resets.

As such, you'll need to start developing your own route (the practice of routing a shmup) to optimise and hold the chain. In particular, be mindful of occasional, momentary sections where there are very few enemies. Before those appear on screen, you might have to slow down your fire rate with some gentle taps, leaving enough popcorn to form a bridge for the chain to pass over and through that less busy section.

There's some other simple systems. The P and B collectible items grant you a power-up and bomb respectively. If you're fully charged in terms of power, scooping up a P nets you some bonus score. Fill your bomb stock, and when you pick up another B you activate

» [Arcade] The pixel art throughout is remarkable, lending a playthrough – and particularly explosions – a wonderfully visceral feel.

BOSS RUSH

BE THE BOSS OF DODONPACHI'S BEE BOSSES

SUZAKU

■ A sizeable flying fortress you'll meet time and again throughout the *DonPachi* series, that is fairly straightforward to best.

HOW TO BEAT THEM

Just keep that laser on this boss. Focus on the central body for the fastest kill. Take out the side pods first for more challenge and score.

SENKOU

■ This vast tank gives you your first truly challenging boss; and you'll see it reappear in *DoDonPachi DaiFukKatsu*'s secret route.

HOW TO BEAT THEM

Here your best bet is to eradicate each side section first. You'll immediately have more ordnance thrown your way, but it's manageable from there.

KAKOU

■ Taking its design cues from classic flying saucer craft, Kakou is covered in smaller gun attachments, packing a punch.

HOW TO BEAT THEM

Again, small movements and focussed laser shots are your best approach. Keep moving to strip away those gun instalments.

RAIKOU

■ Raikou really ups the challenge, particularly when its front section unleashes a barrage of laser power.

HOW TO BEAT THEM

When the laser barrage comes, move far to the side. When the boss swoops your way, pass under the lasers and out to the other side.

» [Arcade] If you can, save up some of your precious bombs for the first loop's final boss – because it sure can take a few.

RANKOU

■ One of the series' most beloved bosses, Rankou throws out a dizzying mix of differing ordnance, including terrifying fireballs

HOW TO BEAT THEM

When the huge fireballs come, treat them like a maze. Play slightly off centre, edging through gaps while trying not to get pinned at the back.

RYUUKOU

■ Huge and persistent, this flying fortress is the hardest there is – aside from loop two's Hibachi TLB

HOW TO BEAT THEM

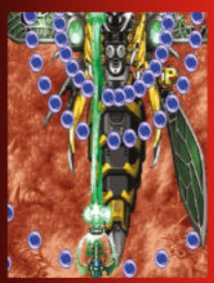
Your chances here are informed by your performance to this point. Bring as many bombs as possible with you, and a will to practice over and over and over again.

A RICH LEGACY

A LOOK AT THE OTHER GAMES IN THE DODONPACHI SERIES

DONPACHI

■ The first game in the series, *DonPachi* is certainly more welcoming than *DoDonPachi*, and a heap of fun, but hadn't quite solidified what was possible with the bullet hell concept. If you want perhaps the easiest mainline *DoDonPachi* arcade clear, try *DonPachi*'s international version.

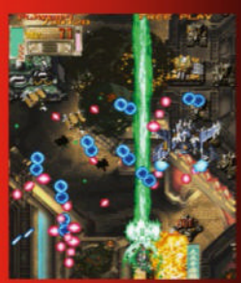


DODONPACHI II: BEE STORM

■ Many CAVE fans will baulk at 2001's *DoDonPachi II* being included here. A lesser series entrance, it was created by International Games System (IGS), as CAVE pondered leaving the arcade market. CAVE ultimately came back, using IGS hardware for the next *DoDonPachi* arcade game.

DODONPACHI DAIOUJOU

■ The true sequel to *DoDonPachi*, with CAVE back at the reins, was 2002's *DaiOuJou*. Brutal in its purebred intensity, this is often seen as the peak of the series. It really is a masterwork, bristling with elegance; and was recently added to M2's *ShotTriggers* series.



DODONPACHI DAIFUKKATSU

■ Known as *DoDonPachi Resurrection* in the West, *DoDonPachi DaiFukkatsu* has ample capacity for high level play, yet it can be a little easier than everything that followed the original *DoDonPachi*. Receiving several rearrangements, it offers players of every kind something to delight.

DODONPACHI SAIDAIOUJOU

■ The final *DoDonPachi* game upped the difficulty again, with 2012's wonderful *SaiDaiOuJou*. A delight to be beaten by and a monster to master, it received a new arrangement in 2020 for the exA-Arcadia system, under the title *DoDonPachi SaiDaiOuJou EXA Label*.

BEE BETTER

QUICK TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR DONDONPACHI GAME

KEEP IT CALM

■ While you need to stay on your feet and keep lively, try to resist wildly whipping about the screen. Small, precise movements let you hold your ground, keep firepower focussed on enemies and avoid tumbling over the edge of control into a bullet curtain.

STARS MATTER

■ Those star item pick-ups you see scattered about might not get you many points when you scoop them up. But gather all you can, because come the end of the level, you'll get a fairly generous bonus for every star claimed since your last death.

STICK WITH IT

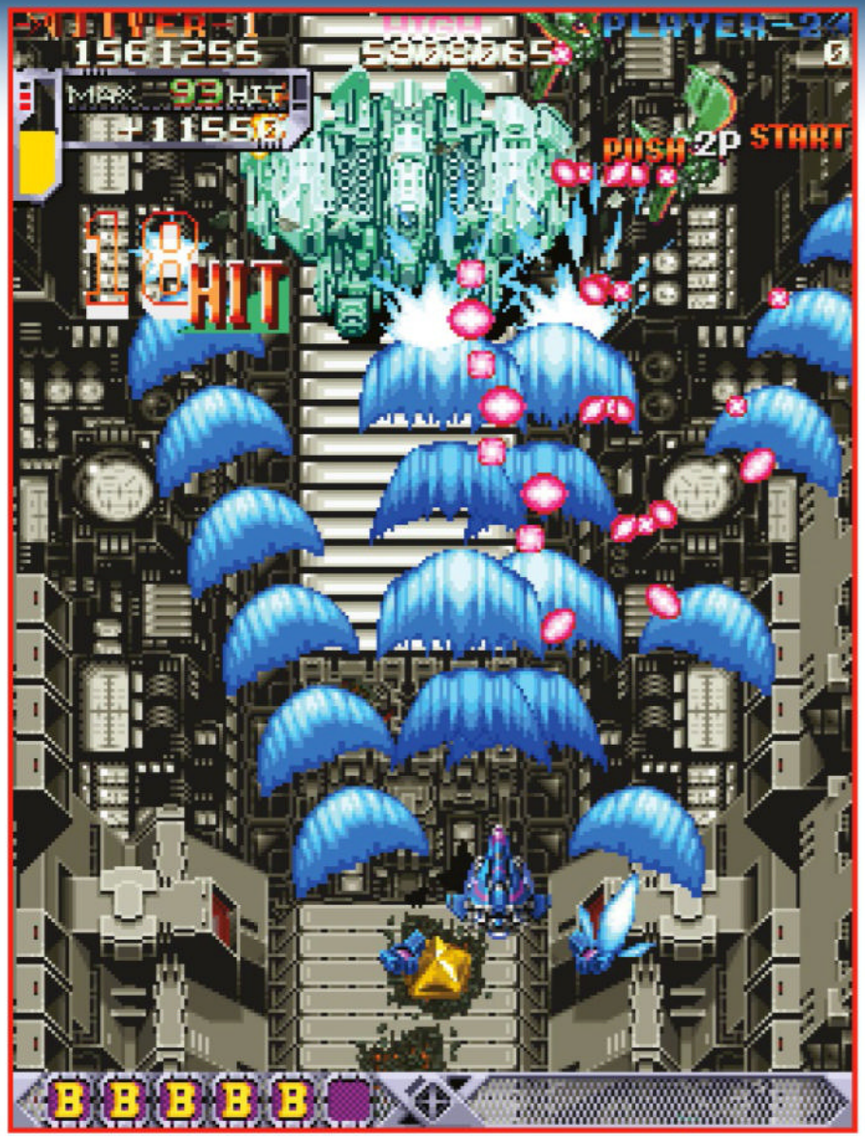
■ Beating *DoDonPachi* is going to take time and discipline. The thrill in winning comes from the effort. Perhaps limit the lengths of your play sessions. An hour a day for a week will get you further than a single seven-hour session.

PICK A STICK?

■ Shooters like *DoDonPachi* were designed to be played with an arcade stick. It's worth adapting to a stick for all the input precision you gain. And yet many great *DoDonPachi* scores have been set with joypad or arrow keys. Be open to sticks, but trust your gut.

YOU CAN DO IT!

■ It's amazing how fast you can improve at bullet hell with regular play. *DoDonPachi* can feel overwhelming when you are new to it. But believe us, as we're speaking from experience. You can clear *DoDonPachi* in one credit without fostering some wild natural talent.



» [Arcade] If you're newer to *DodonPachi*, the best option by far is the blue ship. Its comprehensive wide shot and still-decent laser rip through foes.

BULLET HELLS

UNDERSTANDING DODONPACHI'S CURIOUS AND UNIQUE RELEASE HISTORY

■ As one of the most iconic arcade games ever made, it's rather surprising that *DoDonPachi* is hardly ported. The same year of the arcade release, a Saturn port arrived, introducing Saturn Mode which added a new level and boss. The following year, in 1998, a more purebred port landed on Japanese PlayStations. Following the turn of the new millennium, a handful of reworkings came to Japanese i-mode and EZweb mobile devices under the *DoDonPuchi* title. Then, curiously, in 2010 a playable version of *DoDonPuchi* was hidden inside CAVE's Japanese Xbox 360 visual novel *Instant Brain*. Unlock the game, and you could even play using the Kinect controller, which felt very strange. And then there's the ultra rare, arcade-exclusive Campaign Version, a PCB containing the remixed *DoDonPuchi* that was given to ZBL-NAI, the winner of 1998's Sega Saturn Championship competition. Rumours suggest other entrants may have received a board. Some believe between one and three copies were made. Other reports suggest 100 boards exist. Either way, with the ROM never dumped and CAVE having lost the source code, there really is no more desirable bullet hell release. Almost the only footage is from a homebrew VHS, DDP Professional Vol 2, made by shooting game crew Team SOF (top right).

» [Arcade] If you beat the game after one loop, you'll see a shocking ending (no spoilers here). Clear the second loop, and you learn the full story.

» [Arcade] The real scoring skill in fact comes in maintaining a combo kill chain over a quieter section. Try not to wipe out all the small flying enemies in the previous screens.

▶ the MAXIMUM Bomb Bonus, which grants you 220 points x current combo multiplier per frame, which can radically increase score.

The extra life, meanwhile, comes when your score reaches both 6 million and 20 million points. Another life is available if you destroy the large red structure at the end of stage three. Take out six of the box containers that proceed it, and then the central, main section and a 1UP awaits. You can use bombs, but you'll only get the 1UP if they only damage (rather than destroy) the elements you must annihilate.

Other than that, in general, the laser is your friend throughout, and while you are still refining your technique, don't be afraid to bomb frequently, because the game provides replacements fairly generously. A further genre-wide lesson *DoDonPachi* has to teach, meanwhile, is that so often it's best to hold firm and try and endeavour to limit your movements during the densest bullet patterns. For one, so often you'll find a face-on approach is best to down the many larger enemies. Equally, though, darting about all over the screen – while sometimes required – usually puts you on the edge of control. Instead, unless sweeping back and forth, moving away from aimed and scattered shots, keeping yourself in a central area a little way up from the bottom edge of the screen (so you still have the option to move away backwards) and trying to go with small, precise movements is often the best way forward.

"A FIRST-LOOP CLEAR GIVES YOU THE THRILL OF BEATING AN ICON"

» [Arcade] In stage three this structure reveals *DodonPachi*'s1UP – as long as you destroy the six containers before you down the main structural centre. Bombs are OK, if they damage, but don't destroy the structure's elements.

» [Arcade] Whichever ship you use, you might find yourself mostly using the laser. And that's typically the best way to survive a credit of *DodonPachi*.

And if you do opt to go with the arcade version as your format of choice, you might want to start with the international version. Because *DoDonPachi* has a subtle rank system, essentially meaning the game gets harder the better you play. But the rank in the international build is a little less aggressive, keeping the game more manageable. Some, however, say the original Japanese version's additional bullets over time mean more slowdown, making things more manageable, so you might want to see which fits your style.

There are also 13 Bee Items hidden on each stage. These bee-shaped pick-ups appear after firing a laser over predetermined spots in the game. The more you collect in a given stage, the more they are worth, from a very modest 100 points for the first, to a towering 100,000 points for the 13th. Numerous online Bee Item maps exist to help you in that quest.

Finally, should you manage to clear the game losing just two lives – or by scoring over 50 million, or by picking up 13 Bee Items in four stages, or by achieving a wildly high combo metre – you unlock the second loop. That means returning to the start of the game with significantly increased difficulty, before working your way to the infamously hard true last boss (TLB) Hibachi. Down Hibachi, and you get the real narrative ending.

For us mere mortals, though, a first-loop clear gives you the thrill of beating an icon, and a heap of meaningful training you can take to the genre that followed *DoDonPachi*'s dazzling arrival all those years ago. ✱

Socrates

» **MANUFACTURER:** VTech » **YEAR:** 1988
» **COST:** $129.99 (launch), £25+ (today, boxed), £15+ (today, unboxed)

VTech's first home videogame console, the CreatiVision, had not been a major success, so the company tried something a little different for its second attempt. The Socrates was an educational console, designed to act as a child's first computer – something evident not only in its infra-red wireless keyboard controller, but also the cartridges that are designed to resemble floppy disks. Two wired joypads are built into the keyboard. The design of the Socrates is vaguely reminiscent of the Atari XEGS, largely owing to the diagonal positioning of the keyboard storage bay.

Unusually, the Socrates didn't include an AC adapter as standard despite supporting a standard 12V power supply, but it was capable of running solely via battery power. The console did include a selection of built-in games including *Math Problems*, *Word Games*, *Music Games* and *Super Painter*. This software was pretty important, as just nine cartridges are known to have been released for the console before it was discontinued in the early Nineties. As a result, the Socrates is reasonably cheap but cartridges can cost as much as the console or more. *

Socrates fact

■ Two Socrates cartridges require add-ons: *CAD Professor* requires the mouse, and *Numbers, Shapes & Letters* requires the touch pad. All games support voices via the *Talking System* cartridge.

PROCESSORS: 8-BIT ZILOG Z80 CPU (3.57 MHZ)
GRAPHICS: TOSHIBA AV CONTROLLER
OPERATING SYSTEM: CUSTOM BOOT ROM FEATURING FIVE BUILT-IN GAMES
MEDIA: ROM CARTRIDGE (UP TO 128KB)
RAM: 64KB

SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

ESSENTIAL GAME

Amazing Mazes

Let's be honest – these games are going to be too simple for the vast majority of adult gamers to play for fun, so that leaves kids. Now, you clearly don't want to confuse your kids with the word games, which will teach them American spellings, and the cartridge about US states won't help at all. Out of what's left, mazes seem to be the most appealing thing on the menu, and the cartridge even supports the mouse add-on if you happen to have it. It beats maths, at any rate.

THE EVOLUTION OF TOCA

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RACING SIMS AND ARCADE RACERS, TOCA TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP WAS WELCOMED BY FANS OF BOTH AND PAVED THE WAY FOR A LONG-RUNNING SERIES. TOCA PRODUCER GAVIN RAEBURN RECALLS HOW THE GAMES EVOLVED

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [PlayStation] The cars in *TOCA Touring Car Championship* typically race in tight packs, much like in the actual events.

> "WE WANTED REALISM, BUT WE DESIGNED FOR A BROAD AUDIENCE ON A CONSOLE THAT WAS PRIMARILY PLAYING WITH A DIGITAL GAMEPAD AND LIKELY OWNED A 14-INCH TV"
>
> **GAVIN RAEBURN**

» [PlayStation] Scraping past cars is penalised in *TOCA Touring Car Championship*, making clean driving essential.

Although superficially similar, racing sims of the mid-Nineties such as Geoff Crammond's *Grand Prix 2* and arcade racers from the same period such as Sega's *Daytona USA* were fundamentally different from one another. These two worlds collided in 1996, when a team from Codemasters worked with the British Touring Car Championship to create a PlayStation title that would appeal to both racing camps.

Former Codemasters producer Gavin Raeburn explains how the firm approached the task, "*TOCA Touring Car Championship* was all about building a team and the foundations for what we expected to be a series of games. We were working within the budget and time available, which was limited, and the term 'sim-cade' sprung from that. We wanted realism, but we designed for a broad audience on a console that was primarily playing with a digital gamepad and likely owned a 14-inch TV." In terms of his team's inspirations, the time they spent observing the sport that their game was based on informed the way that it played far more than previous racers. "There were no particular games that influenced us, although we were leaning away from arcade racers and more towards sims," Gavin notes. "The biggest influence was actually the British Touring Car Championship (BTCC) series itself, and trying to emulate this as authentically as we could in game form. A key part of the magic of BTCC was the tightly contested races and limited contact allowed during racing. That invariably led to some interesting situations and battles, and as it was something we weren't seeing in other racing games we were keen to include it in ours."

The focus of the *TOCA* team was to closely replicate British touring car races, but of course it was equally important to make their game appeal to PlayStation owners. "A high level of authenticity and realism was key, as we wanted to accurately reflect what the fans of the sport were watching on TV as best as we could," Gavin reasons. "But we also needed to deliver a game that a broad audience could play. We worked to build as good a core simulation base as we could within the limitations of our primary platform, the PS1, and of course within the limitations of our relatively small team size, which was around 20 or so people."

This compact group adapted the clashes in the TOCA races they were recreating for the PlayStation to allow for some contact, although they deducted points for cheating. "We liked the car-to-car contact and jostling you would see in the actual BTCC races, but we also knew that within a game environment you could use this unfairly to your advantage," Gavin points out. "For example, by hitting cars ahead of you to slow you down for the corners, or spinning cars ahead of you off the track. It was this aspect that I recall we discussed a lot. We were trying to find a balance between allowing fun jostling in races and deterring outright cheating. That was a big problem ▶

» The producer of the *TOCA* series Gavin Raeburn is now the CEO of Lighthouse Games.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
AWESOME AUTOMOBILES
NOTABLE VEHICLES OF THE TOCA SERIES

AUDI A4

First seen in *TOCA Touring Car Championship*, Audi's A4 is the game's only four-wheel drive car – as it was in the actual tournament. Its road handling was so much better than its two-wheel drive rivals that it was banned from the event in 1998.

ALFA ROMEO 156

Available to race in one of *TOCA World Touring Car*'s two European championships, the Alfa Romeo 156 won several real-world races in the Nineties. It's known for its superb cornering, which is made possible by passive rear-wheel steering technology.

ASTON MARTIN DB7

Introduced in *TOCA Race Driver 2*, the pricey British-built Aston Martin DB7 was sold for a little less than £100,000, although you got your money's worth. The DB7 can hit speeds of 165mph, and can go from 0 to 60 in a blistering five seconds.

» [PlayStation] In *TOCA Touring Car Championship*, you get disqualified from races for persistent dangerous driving.

» [PlayStation] As well as improving on the original's visuals, *TOCA 2: Touring Cars* lets you race in Ford Fiestas.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

MEMORABLE MODES

COMPELLING WAYS TO PLAY THE TOCA TITLES

CHAMPIONSHIP MODE

The original *TOCA* game's Championship Mode has 12 meetings with two qualifying rounds and two races each. You need 20 points per event to progress, which requires a minimum of two top-three finishes and no points deducted for reckless driving.

FREE RACE MODE

Based on real-world exhibition races, the Free Race Mode in *TOCA World Touring Cars* lets you set up your own series of events. Up to four players can join in, racing on up to eight tracks over one to 30 laps in their chosen weather conditions.

PRO CAREER MODE

In *TOCA Race Driver 3*'s Pro Career Mode you pick a racing Discipline, and then take part in a series of championships within that Discipline. For example, in the Oval category you compete on dirt circuits through to the Indianapolis Speedway.

> "TOCA WORLD TOURING CARS OFFERED A COLLECTION OF RACING STYLES AND CHAMPIONSHIPS PRESENTED IN A GAME-FLOW WHERE YOU WERE NEVER QUITE SURE WHAT WAS COMING NEXT"
> **GAVIN RAEBURN**

» [PlayStation] One of the new championships in *TOCA 2: Touring Cars* is based around Formula Ford support races.

» [PlayStation] Unlike its predecessors, there are very few pre-championship qualifying races in *TOCA World Touring Cars.*

that we had to try to solve again when the series moved online later on."

Like the real-world TOCA, *TOCA Touring Car Championship* had a structure based on qualifying for sequential race meetings, but it was also given various other modes. "Race Weekends were all about capturing the whole immersion of a BTCC weekend," Gavin remembers. "That was part of the reason we included some of the support races from the BTCC calendar in the later games. Split-screen multiplayer was par for the course for racing games at the time, so it had to be included, which was difficult given the technical complexity of the game. It was fun though, and it was a precursor test bed for online play in subsequent *TOCA* titles. Time Trial was included as a way of easily accessing the tracks and perfecting lap times, but it was often a game within itself!"

Although reviewers focussed on *TOCA Touring Car Championship*'s core challenge on its release, they reserved praise for its other modes. The follow-up was more of an update than a sequel, but it did add Ford Fiesta and Formula Ford support races. "We wanted to give more authenticity to the game, so adding the support races made sense," Gavin reflects. "They also came as part of the TOCA licence, so they were cheap to add! But of more importance was that they allowed for a different and more varied championship structure."

TOCA 2: Touring Cars also featured new modes, including a checkpoint-based challenge and a four-player mode requiring two PlayStations and two TVs. "We were always trying to add new race experiences to each game we made," Gavin remarks. "We wanted to avoid just releasing a seasonally updated version of what came before. Our limited budget meant we couldn't match the number of cars in *Gran Turismo*, but we could be creative with the way we used our content, and so we were always thinking of fun new game modes."

When *TOCA 2* came out its novel modes were applauded, and its improved visuals won plaudits. Naturally a third game was approved, but it didn't focus on the BTCC. "We wanted to continue to expand interest in our series globally by including content from around the world," Gavin recollects. "Some of this content was so popular that it gave rise to the inclusion of other championships over time, such as V8 Supercars and DTM, which were the BTCC equivalents in Australia and Germany, and events such as Le Mans. The downside, however, was that we could of course only build so much content for each game, so we couldn't feature each championship in its entirety, which was what we would have liked to have done."

A side-effect of this was that *TOCA World Touring Cars* felt more arcade-like than the earlier games, most noticeably with its lack of qualifying and penalties for reckless driving. "*TOCA World Touring Cars* offered a collection of racing styles and championships presented in a game-flow where you were never quite sure what was coming next," Gavin observes. "It broke away from the linear structure of other racing games that offered limited content in typically a single championship, certainly in terms of circuits and driving styles. So we decided to strip out some of the qualifying and rules to keep the flow high paced. We knew racing and battling through a pack of cars was great fun, and we felt the formula and direction we were heading in helped us to break away from other games."

The geographical and genre tweaks *TOCA World Touring Cars* made to the series formula were embraced by PS1 owners and critics alike, and so its PS2 successor continued this evolution with a cinematic narrative featuring a tragic player character. "Racing championships are as much about the rivalry of the drivers as they are about the racing, and we wanted to capture some of that in our game," Gavin considers. "We did this by highlighting some of the stories and the characters you might find in the world of motorsport. We hoped this would add a human touch that would motivate the

player while they were racing. It also helped to add some overarching structure to the game, and allowed it to become more than just one race after another at different locations."

In terms of the story-led sequel's tracks and cars, *TOCA Race Driver* favoured new additions over old favourites, which was partly due to it being the first PS2 *TOCA* title. "Unlocking different types of racing often meant new, specific tracks were needed," Gavin recalls. "We also needed new content to keep things fresh. Additionally, console transitions were especially hard, as circuits we had built for previous games needed a big overhaul to make them next-gen ready. It was the same for the cars. We also had licence costs, and of course we had to consider our limited budget."

Another feature that differentiated *TOCA Race Driver* was that its core career mode bundled cars, racing teams and circuits rather than letting players mix and match. "We were restricted by the terms of our main licences," Gavin divulges, "so there were championship-specific cars that could only race on the circuits in *those* championships, and that meant that we weren't allowed to mix certain cars together in certain races."

TOCA Race Driver's career challenge ensured positive reviews when it hit shop shelves. Its sequel then upped the ante with races including everything from Supercars to Supertrucks. "That was part of our continued push to offer variety, but we were also facing a budget cut for *TOCA Race Driver 2*," Gavin discloses. "So we chose manufacturers with a greater range of vehicles, as that proved cost effective from a licensing perspective."

As part of the effort to outdo its predecessor, events were designed for *TOCA Race Driver 2* that featured 20 vehicles at a time, although races on smaller courses had fewer. "We knew jostling with other cars and racing through a pack worked well, so were always pushing the field limit as far as we could," Gavin enthuses. "But we found larger race fields were not always better. They were fine on bigger, faster circuits, but the tighter, smaller circuits worked better when there were fewer vehicles racing on them at the same time."

Other design decisions were about tweaking the *TOCA* formula, for example, in *TOCA Race Driver 2* you might be challenged to beat a rival rather than placing first. "We wanted to make the races more than about just *winning*, and we wanted to boost the sense of competition and personal rivalry found in real racing championships," Gavin contemplates. "We were also breaking up the format in other ways. We were borrowing from motorsport as well as a wider range of car culture, for example, there was the Aston Martin racing on a big

» [PlayStation 2] Unusually for a *TOCA* game, cutting corners in *TOCA Race Driver 3*'s rallies isn't penalised.

» [PlayStation 2] *TOCA Race Driver* took the series in a new direction with its cutscenes and plot-driven gameplay.

» [PlayStation 2] Speedway racing is one of the most distinctive events that are introduced in *TOCA Race Driver.*

ice track, which was us riffing on the *Bond* movie of the day."

Like its predecessor, *TOCA Race Driver 2*'s main mode was driven by a narrative, which reviewers heaped praise on for delivering personality and humour. Arguably, the storyline worked better than the one created for the game that followed. "*TOCA Race Driver 2*'s story was probably the most successful of that trio of games," Gavin concurs. "The budget constraints for *TOCA Race Driver 3*, and some issues with new character tech, meant that we had to cut around two thirds of our story for that game, which was a real shame. The 'face' tech was way ahead of its time when it worked, but it wasn't mature enough to deliver all of our scenes in the time that we had."

In other areas, *TOCA Race Driver 3* surpassed the earlier game, most notably with a World Tour consisting of tiers of racing Disciplines, which players unlocked by meeting the objectives of a Discipline in the previous tier. But while the game's scale and ambition were applauded by critics and players, it ultimately became a swan song for the series. "Having an open-ended World Tour mode in addition to the linear Pro Career mode was purely about offering longevity in gameplay for those players who wanted it," Gavin reviews. "But it felt right for the trilogy to end there, and it felt like the series had run its course, because we were becoming limited by the format."

Not that Gavin or Codemasters were finished with racing games, however, and although their subsequent racers may have lacked the *TOCA* name, some built on the *TOCA* games' legacy. "I wanted to reset expectations," Gavin comments. "New consoles meant new tooling, and new opportunities to take fresh ideas forward. We always wanted to break new ground. That was what led to *DiRT* and *Grid*, which were very different in tone compared to what had come before, and were the most successful games we created, both creatively and commercially."

Reflecting on the *TOCA* titles that came before, Gavin views the entire process of making them through a lens of his growth as a developer during a time of rapid evolution for the games industry. "Those early *TOCA* days felt like the Cambrian explosion of game evolution for us – there was lots of growth and experimentation, and lots of new ways of doing everything," Gavin assesses. "We had very limited budgets, but also complete freedom from Codemasters to create the games we wanted to make. We had a lot of fun, iterating and testing ideas so quickly that we felt like we were advancing in great strides with every game. It was hard work, but it was also a great learning experience."

» [PlayStation 2] They're not the fastest vehicles, but the supertrucks in *TOCA Race Driver 2* are still fun to race.

"THERE WAS THE ASTON MARTIN RACING ON A BIG ICE TRACK, WHICH WAS US RIFFING ON THE BOND MOVIE OF THE DAY"
GAVIN RAEBURN

» [PlayStation 2] *TOCA Race Driver 3* incorporates numerous events, although the TOCA championship isn't one of them.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
COOL COMPETITIONS
OUTSTANDING EVENTS FROM THE TOCA GAMES

BRITISH TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP

The TOCA tournaments of the Nineties are faithfully recreated in the first, second and fourth *TOCA* games. TOCA is defined by tight packs of cars driving at top speeds on British tracks, where the weather is as much of a concern as your rivals.

NORTH AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP

The global aspect of *TOCA World Touring Cars* allows for sun-baked tracks and gaudy paint jobs. This is best demonstrated by the game's North American Championship, which really lets you know that you've left the likes of Silverstone far behind.

CLASSICS DISCIPLINE

TOCA Racer Driver 3's Classics Discipline offers a quite different challenge to any of the others in the game. Its sequence of unlockable tournaments is ordered by the vintage of vehicle being driven, from Thirties race cars to Seventies muscle cars.

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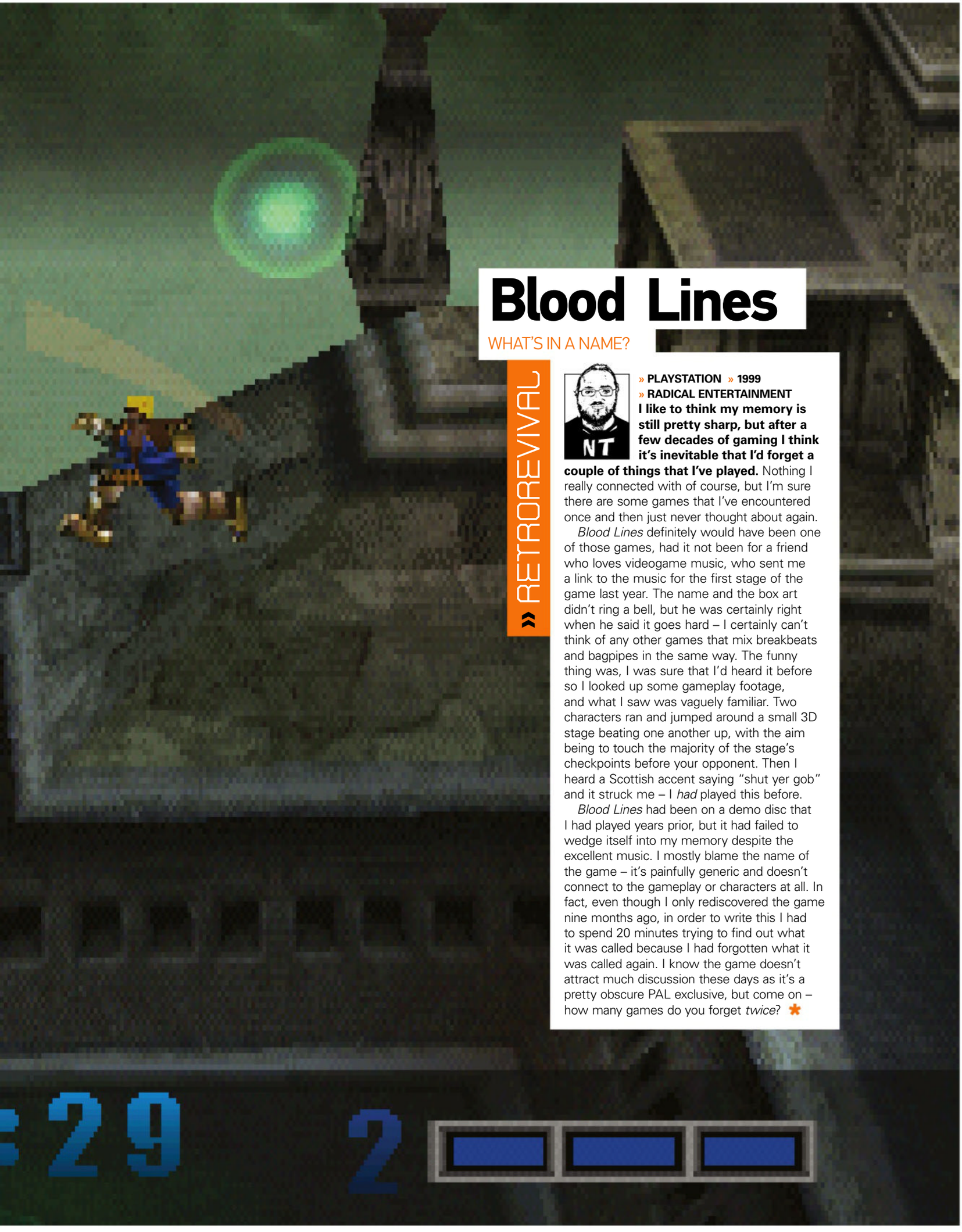


Blood Lines

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

RETROREVIVAL

» PLAYSTATION » 1999
» RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT

I like to think my memory is still pretty sharp, but after a few decades of gaming I think it's inevitable that I'd forget a couple of things that I've played. Nothing I really connected with of course, but I'm sure there are some games that I've encountered once and then just never thought about again.

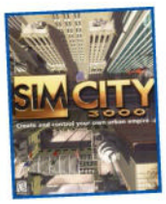
Blood Lines definitely would have been one of those games, had it not been for a friend who loves videogame music, who sent me a link to the music for the first stage of the game last year. The name and the box art didn't ring a bell, but he was certainly right when he said it goes hard – I certainly can't think of any other games that mix breakbeats and bagpipes in the same way. The funny thing was, I was sure that I'd heard it before so I looked up some gameplay footage, and what I saw was vaguely familiar. Two characters ran and jumped around a small 3D stage beating one another up, with the aim being to touch the majority of the stage's checkpoints before your opponent. Then I heard a Scottish accent saying "shut yer gob" and it struck me – I *had* played this before.

Blood Lines had been on a demo disc that I had played years prior, but it had failed to wedge itself into my memory despite the excellent music. I mostly blame the name of the game – it's painfully generic and doesn't connect to the gameplay or characters at all. In fact, even though I only rediscovered the game nine months ago, in order to write this I had to spend 20 minutes trying to find out what it was called because I had forgotten what it was called again. I know the game doesn't attract much discussion these days as it's a pretty obscure PAL exclusive, but come on – how many games do you forget *twice*?

SIM CITY 3000

MAXIS IS A HOUSEHOLD NAME AT THIS POINT, BUT IF NOT FOR SIMCITY 3000 THEN WE MIGHT NEVER HAVE SEEN IT GROW INTO THE BELOVED DEVELOPER IT IS TODAY. RETRO GAMER EXPLORES THE TROUBLED DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME THAT SAVED MAXIS

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** MAXIS
- **RELEASED:** 1999
- **PLATFORM:** PC, MAC
- **GENRE:** SIM

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SIMCITY
RELEASED: 1989
PLATFORM: PC, VARIOUS

SIMANT
RELEASED: 1991
PLATFORM: AMIGA, PC

SPORE (PICTURED)
RELEASED: 2008
PLATFORM: PC, MAC

If you were to ask the internet (and let's face it, you're better off not doing that), you probably wouldn't find a consensus for which the 'best' *SimCity* is. Even with surface level research you'd find: *2000* is the favourite of retro purists; *4* is popular for its deep simulation; the original is well-praised but only the 'favourite' of belligerent hipsters; heck, even 2013's well-documented disastrous reboot of *SimCity* has its fans some 11 years on. But *SimCity 3000* is fairly unique in that its fans don't gush over specific features or wistfully long for the days of city-building done right. Instead, it's all a little more emotive; to its fans, *3000* is warm, comforting, familiar. And that was intentional.

"It was interesting because my entry into Maxis corresponded with the end of the era of pixel art," says Ocean Quigley, the art director on *SimCity 3000*. "You had a whole art team – which at the time seemed like a lot of people, half a dozen or eight people – who were doing pixel art, and we were switching over to a scenario where we modelled things and then rendered them instead of hand painting them." By the late-Nineties, practically everyone was looking to make the switch to 3D as the hot new thing, and developers of well-loved franchises were quickly trying to figure out how to bring their new-fangled 3D version to market quicker than anyone else. "That was just a really sharp and unpleasant transition," recalls Ocean, "because all these people who had pixel-art skills were suddenly fumbling around trying to figure out what to do, you either switch over to 3D, become a UI artist or you left the industry."

Maxis was in a fairly unique position at the time, however, in that the success of *SimCity* and particularly *SimCity 2000* (which released December 1993) had earned itself an opportunity that not many developers get: it could experiment. And that's just what Maxis did, releasing a *Sim* version of any concept you could imagine, from golf to farming, from piloting helicopters to creating life itself, Maxis tried to bring some of that *SimCity* magic to practically anything.

But despite all of its attempts, Maxis was struggling to find a new hit. In fact, things were looking pretty dire for the studio so naturally talk started on a *SimCity 2000* sequel, something that would modernise a game that Moore's Law dictated was now practically ancient. The trouble was, with Will Wright off playing with a dollhouse simulator, *SimCity 3000* had suffered at the hands of a design team that didn't have the experience to succinctly nail down what the next game was going to be. It was initially a "simulation maximalist" as Ocean puts it, with no particular direction for the player or understanding of what the player might actually want to do. "You could zoom in on a burger joint and set the price of the burger," explains Ocean, "like if you were an 11 year old and you had a fantasy of what you might want to do with *SimCity*. And so the design doc at the time ran to something like 200 pages of minutiae with no overarching, clear simple mechanics that must be implemented. It was much more hallucinogenic riffs on micro-detail that happens in the city that you might want to manipulate." Not only that, but it was all being built in 3D, too, at a time when the technology was still too "ridiculously premature" to be attempting something so complex.

This preproduction of *SimCity 3000* rolled on for quite some time, eating up resources and development time that Maxis could ill afford. Worse still, things were not looking good for ▶

"IT WAS AN 11 YEAR OLD'S FANTASY OF WHAT YOU MIGHT WANT TO DO WITH SIMCITY"
OCEAN QUIGLEY

TRIP TO THE YEAR 3000

THE CITY (BUILDER) OF THE FUTURE?

The naming convention for *SimCity 3000* might allude to some sci-fi elements, but the fact is the focus is still on starting from the year 1900 and growing exponentially from there. With *SimCity 2000* acting as the foundation in all regards for the third game in the series, there weren't so many drastic changes to the simulation.

The most obvious improvement is to the map size, which is significantly bigger than *SimCity 2000* and as a result it's possible to reach a population in the millions. The underlying systems were all overhauled, too, with a more robust and realistic land value metric being the most significant. Transportation was also improved with miniature cars and trains navigating the environment to replace the moving pixels of *SimCity 2000*. It also became possible to interact with external forces, whether that was buying or selling power, water or trash to your neighbours or taking part in construction projects to give a boost to your city.

That's not to say there wasn't anything new to the game. Waste management was a new concept, as was the option to build industrial farmlands on the outskirts of the city. Petitioners were also added on top of the improved advisor system, which added a lot more personality but also allowed you to get offers for unique buildings or ordinances in certain situations. Landmarks, too, let players rebuild the cities of their dreams, even if their impact on the simulation was limited.

» [PC] It's common that you might focus too much on your latest new district only to find out that half of your city is out of power and water.

» [PC] Everything starts with the random map generation, letting you pick various layouts and amounts of water, hills and trees.

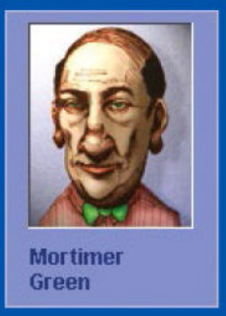
» [PC] If you're not saving the most idyllic space for the mayor's house, are you really using your power wisely?

THE CITY PLANNERS

MEET THE ADVISORS THAT WILL HELP YOU BUILD YOUR CITY

CONSTANCE LEE

As the City Planner for your burgeoning metropolis, you'll meet with Constance often. She's the most gameplay-oriented and covers the layout of the city from connections with neighbouring cities to zoning growth and land values. She's the least judgmental of all the advisors given her general purpose.



MORTIMER GREEN

No city can grow without some solid finances behind it, and that's where Mortimer Green comes in. As the Financial Advisor for your city he comes with a rather unsurprising humourlessness, but expect to see him when taxes are too high or you'll still be in the red in the fiscal year.

MOE BIEHL

You'll see Moe a lot because it will frequently happen that your streets are gridlocked and your public transport is overcrowded. That's the tricky balancing act of maintaining a growing city, and Moe's jovial – almost nonchalant – attitude towards it all is merciful while you're facing this problem.

KAREN FRAWL

Whether you choose to go all-in on a clean, pollution-free city or consider it to be cost-effective collateral, Karen will be there to let you know how it's all going. She'll criticise you if the pollution is getting too much, but she wears a turtleneck so who's she to judge? Fun fact: Karen apparently has 12 cats.

MARIA MONTOYA

Maria has a fairly niche advisory role covering all aspects of city safety. You'll mostly see her popping up if you've forgotten (again) to place fire and police stations within your latest neighbourhood expansion, but if you increase the safety budget you might actually get a smile out of her.

RANDALL SHOOP

The substitute teacher vibes of Randall are perhaps fitting given his role as HEA advisor, meaning Health, Education and Aura. That might sound a bit new-age for a civic position, but it is essentially the measurement of happiness for your Sims given their access to essential services and recreation activities.

the studio and early previews of the all-new, fully-3D-with-exclamation-marks *SimCity 3000* were only being met with negativity. "They had been working on it for years before I came in," says Christine McGavran, who became the development director on *SimCity 3000*. "I had seen a demo at a trade show and it was chunky. I was like, 'What are they doing with one of my favourite games?' They had this big exhibit, it was like, 'All 3D!' I had heard from *The Sims* folks that they were sceptical, that was why they were in a separate office so they wouldn't get dragged into it." With the project floundering and Maxis failing to find any success with any of its other ventures, measures needed to be taken to save the company.

That's where Electronic Arts stepped in. EA bought Maxis in mid-1997, at which point the studio announced that *SimCity 3000* was set to be released in December 1998. At this point you're probably wondering about the obvious disparity. The *SimCity 3000* that would later release in February 1999 was not fully 3D and certainly didn't allow minute details like fast food restaurant prices to be controlled by the player. "They were way behind schedule," says Christine, "they were just struggling to get the core game engine to work." As part of the acquisition by EA, Luc Barthelet became general manager of Maxis, who had shared the concerns surrounding the fully 3D *SimCity* game. Despite already having connections within Maxis, Christine was brought in via EA as development director to help manage the team to turn something viable out of *SimCity 3000*. "I told Luc, 'This isn't how you should do it, you shouldn't do full 3D, you're never going to get there. Here's the maths, here's how many pixels you'd be pushing with a large city. There's no way the computer can handle it.'"

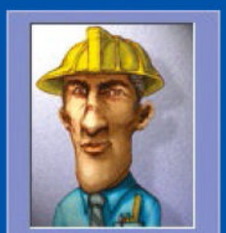
> "I HAD HEARD FROM THE SIMS FOLKS THAT THEY WERE SCEPTICAL"
> **CHRISTINE MCGAVRAN**

While the stories of EA acquisitions aren't very often celebratory ones, in the case of Maxis it is unlikely that *SimCity 3000* in the state that it was in would've saved the studio as it was intended. It was decided that the 3D engine would be scrapped, the visuals would need to be redone, and the game would need to be more in line with what *SimCity* players actually wanted. With that in mind, Lucy Bradshaw – who later went on to become general manager of Maxis and one of the studio's most recognisable names – came in to help get the new, simpler, more sellable version of *SimCity 3000* on track. "Lucy came and said, 'OK, we're going to try to figure out what the magic of *SimCity 2000* was and how to make it visually richer, bigger and how to pull it into the modern era,'" explains Ocean. The tricky part was doing all of this with only nine months of production time.

From an art side, this meant strictly two things: firstly, returning to a sprite-based graphics system, but modernising it by modelling all the buildings in 3D, lighting them in 3D and then rendering them out as sprites. "It also meant for the first time grappling with what the buildings and in fact the art and the game needs to represent," adds Ocean. As the art director, Ocean realised that it was important for the city – which is little more than a set of tiles in a database – to essentially become a UI element, so the player could know precisely what state any given part of the city was in just by glancing at it. "So, is it a building? Is it industrial, residential or commercial? Is it low, medium or high density? Is it high wealth, low wealth or medium wealth? Is it on fire? So you basically have these tables, with one axis being density and the other wealth and you have essentially a tic-tac-toe shape."

And with the opportunity for higher-fidelity graphics, it was also a chance to start to think a bit more precisely about the aesthetics of the game, one area that *SimCity 3000* fans tend to glorify more than other games in the series. "Sitting down on your butt and designing a virtual city and having it come to life is not a normal thing for people to do," laughs Ocean, "so I wanted to make the visual styling of it to be super warm and comfortable. Familiar. So I came up with a sort of aesthetic periods in architecture that I felt we could represent in a way that would feel like it was inspired by model trains. Not just representative of the state that they're in but also feel like the best model train set buildings that you could possibly imagine." For the first time, *SimCity* was being visually designed in a way to have a character, and to play up to that sense of humour that Maxis as a studio was already building its identity around. That jazz-infused cosy vibe built a personality into a game and genre that hadn't existed before. And this led

» [PC] *SimCity 3000*'s early game is surprisingly tricky. Avoid expanding too quickly and taking out numerous loans to pay for it.



GUS ODDMAN

As a city expands, so too does its demands for power and water. Gus' job might not be a glamorous one, but it is essential given the critical nature of electricity and sewerage for your city. As such, Gus Oddman's role is rather more pragmatic than other advisors.

DISASTER STRIKES

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE WORST HAPPENS

FIRE

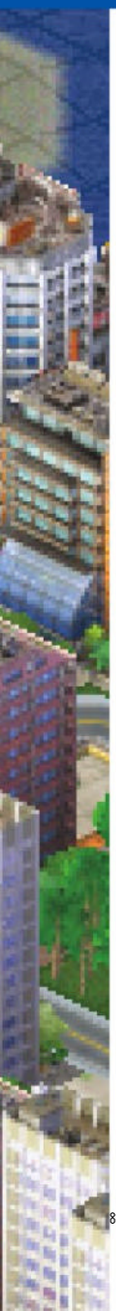
■ Prevention is better than the cure here, and suitable fire station coverage, an appropriate budget and even ordinances to help (free smoke detectors) will reduce the occurrences of fire. If one should break out, however, grab that bulldozer tool and destroy the buildings surrounding the fire – if there's nothing near to burn, it cannot spread.

EARTHQUAKES

■ There are ordinances that will help to reduce the destruction of an earthquake, but there's not much you can do to counteract them. To avoid significant damage, ensure you're not relying on a single power or water connection across bodies of water in case it gets destroyed. And be prepared for fires, too.

TORNADO

■ Quite honestly there's very little you can do about a tornado once it starts rampaging through your city. The best thing you can do is anticipate its direction and if you see that it'll impact something significant (power supplies, hospitals) immediately start building backups in the area to minimise downtime.



to many decisions surrounding the game. The addition of a news ticker, for example, wasn't only functional in that it could draw the player's attention to important facets of their city, good or bad, but was also interspersed with fun and silly fake headlines that were bound to get a smirk out of anyone paying attention. The advisors and petitioners were admittedly a quick fix (Ocean mentions that photo and 3D were failed experiments prior to the final caricature illustrations), but they still brought in a sense of personality to the game's overall aesthetic.

Gameplay-wise there was less wiggle room for overhauling features simply due to the fact that the production time was so limited. Essentially it was *SimCity 2000* enhanced: a bigger-than-ever city map, refined simulation features and a smattering of new features like waste management, industrial farmlands and a new (third) density type. "Because the game was so over budget and so overscheduled, we didn't really have the ability to take a big risk with a new concept," says Christine, "so the values that we were going for were this really polished and modernised game that we loved with a simulator that worked. But it was a complete rewrite of *SimCity 2000*."

Despite being hired in a management position, Christine's influence and input on the game was far-reaching. "I'm sure they were suspicious of the EA leadership," says Christine, "so when I came in to manage the team, there was a definite, 'Oh Christine doesn't know anything, we've been doing this for a while.' There was a surprising number of women at Maxis, but the engineering team was 100% male and so I was leading a bunch of guys – most of whom were older than me – some of them were really welcoming, and some were very suspicious of me." Christine's motivation was to help Maxis release a game that could be a valuable successor to the game she loved and that meant getting hands-on with the code. "The big thing that I took on was the traffic and transit simulator," says Christine, "I looked at it and it was just not ready and so I just dug in. I interviewed Will [Wright] and anyone who had worked on the prior version of it and tried to learn what they had done and what they had wished they had done."

> "I WANTED IT TO FEEL LIKE THE BEST MODEL TRAIN SET BUILDINGS THAT YOU COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE"
> **OCEAN QUIGLEY**

Unsurprisingly given the messy start and short production time, development on *SimCity 3000* was intense. It was an "existential" project, as Christine puts it, and even with EA's influence it was still essential that *SimCity 3000* was successful enough to revitalise the studio. For the majority of a whole year, the team was working weekends and late nights just to hit that December 1998 release date, a date that was ultimately missed. Even in the eleventh hour, things were desperate. "We get everything implemented but it's just completely out of balance," recalls Christine. "It's December and I sit down to play the game and it's completely unplayable. And I didn't think it was a bug in the code, it was just clearly the tuning." Christine's solution was to speak to Will about how he had tuned *SimCity 2000*, and from there she switched to Microsoft Excel. "I took all the layers and I put them into a spreadsheet and I used Visual Basic to code a high-level version of the simulator. And then I put in what I wanted the game to end up with in terms of how long it would take to play and how big the city could get. I stayed up all night tuning the parameters and then testing in the game until it felt right. And we literally locked in the code the next day. That's what we shipped with and I was terrified, I had barely played it. But I hoped it was more balanced."

» [PC] Maybe it was just this writer, but it was always a thrill to see what new building was going to pop up.

» [PC] A variety of visual layers let you understand the underlying systems of your city and work to improve them.

RIOTS

■ These are the crime equivalent of fires, and as such are fairly easy to prevent so long as you're vigilant with your police coverage and related ordinances. If a riot does break out, you can send your police force to go and handle the problem, though there can be a side-effect of fires breaking out as a result so be prepared for that.

NUCLEAR MELTDOWN

■ If you are foolish enough to let your nuclear plant age beyond its 20-year life, then you deserve the destruction a meltdown will cause. The explosion itself won't cause the most significant damage, but the radiation area that remains afterwards will mean you've a large plot of unusable land in your city for years to come.

UFO

■ In later games the alien invasion disaster is a little more destructive, but in *SimCity 3000* it's actually kind of tame. Spaceships will fly about your city abducting Sims (thus abandoning the building) and firing out some erratic green missiles. If a fire breaks out then you might have some trouble, otherwise this disappointing disaster is just about waiting it out.

» [PC] Wintry environments were possible, but if you went for a mountainous landscape then you wouldn't actually have many building opportunities.

Mercifully for Maxis, the maths worked. After the long "dysfunctional and torturous preproduction" of the game, as described by Ocean, *SimCity 3000* released on Windows February 1999, and it was pretty quickly apparent that it was going to be a hit. It sold over one million copies in its first six months, was met with great acclaim and has since gone on to foster fond memories in the hearts of those that played it. But its legacy is something greater, "My sense is that if EA hadn't acquired Maxis and they had continued to flounder for a while, that would have been it for the studio," says Ocean, "they would have just vanished into a puff of smoke. Because this was years before *The Sims* came out, and it wasn't as if we had another ace up our sleeve to keep the studio alive." It's ironic that EA is the saviour of *SimCity* given *SimCity*, its 2013 disaster, essentially put the franchise to bed, but if not for the publisher Maxis might never have released *SimCity 4*, might never have finished *The Sims*, and might not still be making games to this day. ✱

» [PC] *SimCity 3000 Unlimited* added in a number of local events, and US players could trigger a Thanksgiving parade.

CONTRA OPERATION GALUGA

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
- **DEVELOPER:** WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES
- **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
- **PLATFORM:** SWITCH, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** RUN-AND-GUN

ASIDE FROM AN EXCELLENT COMPILATION AND THE DISAPPOINTING CONTRA: ROGUE CORPS, KONAMI'S LONG-RUNNING SERIES HAS BEEN RATHER QUIET OF LATE. WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES IS HOPING TO CHANGE ALL THAT WITH A DYNAMIC NEW REBOOT OF THE ORIGINAL GAME

WORDS BY DARRAN JONES

While it offered interesting ideas and solid action, *Contra: Rogue Corps* wasn't the *Contra* game that many fans had hoped for. That may explain why Konami has decided to reboot the classic franchise as Akiyoshi Chosokabe explains. "In order to develop the franchise in the future, we thought it was time to go back to basics and reboot *Contra*," we're told. "We wanted to start a new evolution while returning to our roots, so *Contra: Operation Galuga* is not a remake faithful to the original, but rather a new game based on the first with extra elements added." That sentiment of *Contra: Operation Galuga* being a new experience is reinforced by Tomm Hulett, the game's director. "While the setting and plot is the same as the original game, the level designs and boss patterns, etc are brand-new. Fans of the original will be quite surprised."

Less surprising perhaps is the news that WayForward is involved with Konami's new reboot. After all, it was behind the excellent *Contra 4* for the DS, which shockingly, was never released in Europe. As a result Tomm is aware of what does and doesn't need to be done in *Operation Galuga*. "With the expectations of *Contra* fans and the view of retro games at the time, we focussed on making sure *Contra 4* was extremely challenging. This gave it a feeling of authenticity, but also limited its ability to attract new fans to the run-and-gun genre," Tomm admits. "Games I have worked on since then, I have tried to find ways to keep the same level of authentic retro gameplay, but with features or considerations for newer players. The goal is not to water down the action or intensity, but to give players a more welcoming first experience so they are encouraged to learn the game or understand its appeal. It's with this type of mindset we created *Contra: Operation Galuga*."

» [Switch] The Switch version of *Operation Galuga* offers a lower framerate with Tomm telling us, "Based on platform, we targeted 60fps where possible, and locked 30fps elsewhere for stable gameplay." After playing the Switch demo we hope the final release is a smoother experience.

» [PC] Tomm hopes *Operation Galuga* will appeal to everyone, saying, "We made sure to schedule enough time to balance [the game] on all difficulty levels so that all players can experience true *Contra* action."

While *Contra* started life in arcades, it arguably gained popularity through its NES release so it should come as no surprise to learn that that version has been used as a blueprint by WayForward as confirmed by Tomm. "We primarily used the Famicom version for any direction inspiration, however there are a few subtle elements for arcade fans. I wonder if players will recognise them…"

Although *Operation Galuga* may use that first *Contra* game for inspiration, mechanically it will be very different. "There are many mechanics from later *Contra* games which will appear, such as health meters, stackable weapons, and abilities like dash and double jump," explains Tomm, adding that Overload is the major new mechanic for the game that lets you sacrifice unwanted weapons to unleash new explosive abilities. "The Overload is another risk-reward mechanic which adds more consideration to the weapons the player picks up and how they are best used. We expect a lot of experimentation around this mechanic as expert players learn

"WE WANTED TO START A NEW EVOLUTION WHILE RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS"
AKIYOSHI CHOSOKABE

» [PC] Tomm feels that some of *Operation Galuga*'s new weapons are "quite different and provide new mechanics to gameplay, such as charging up powerful shots".

» [PC] It's certainly going to be interesting to see how chaotic things get with four players at once.

» [Switch] Is it us, or does this enemy look like it has stepped out of a *Resident Evil* game? Quick! Kill it with fire!

the game, but it is also useful for beginners. Please don't be shy about overloading your weapons in a pinch."

Another big series change is to multiplayer. Where previous *Contra* games catered for two players at once, *Operation Galuga* ups the ante to four – something that WayForward had tried to add before. "This is something we initially attempted for *Contra 4*, so it was satisfying to finally realise this feature," admits Tomm. "The biggest concern was making sure there is enough to shoot at, and that four players can't just erase enemies immediately. We also increase boss HP based on players. But overall, it succeeds in feeling like the classic feeling of two-player *Contra*, but doubled!"

» We're unsure if *Contra: Operation Galuga* will receive a physical release beyond the now-sold out editions by Limited Run Games.

It's unclear just how hard *Operation Galuga* will end up being, but Tomm is well aware of the series' legacy in this area. "We have a Hard mode of course, but also some options to tailor a more hardcore action game experience, such as turning off the health meter so that players die in a single hit. This feature can be used on any difficulty level. Of course, these settings show up on the end-game results screen, so players are able to show off on social media."

While WayForward is taking the classic series in interesting directions, it's clear it understands *Contra*'s DNA. "After playing and working on many *Contra* titles this is more of a feeling, and perhaps hard to put into words. But, to anyone watching the game being played, there should be a level of action happening that seems almost impossible to overcome," concludes Tomm. "However, players would soon learn – even knowing just basic movement and aiming – how to take care of each challenge. Then by practice, they create their ideal path through each stage. However, it is not a matter of memorisation. If the player makes a mistake, or loses their preferred weapon, they should never think well, that's it. Time to reset! Instead, they feel capable like they can refocus and forge a new path to victory, even on their very last life." It sounds like Konami's venerable series is in very safe hands.

ULTIMATE X 2

Tomm Hulett on upgrading Contra's bosses

Boss encounters are a huge part of *Contra*'s appeal and WayForward certainly knows this. "This was an important area of focus for me, personally," admits Tomm. "*Contra* has many legendary bosses, of course. Even with *Contra 4*, we said for example, 'Let's make the ultimate version of Gromaides' (the alien atop the waterfall). But now, with *Operation Galuga*, we had to plan the ULTIMATE ultimate version."

It's certainly an interesting challenge and Wayforward is no doubt hoping that the mayors it does create are every bit as memorable as those found in earlier games. "Our first step is to find interesting things for each boss to do so each one provides a unique idea or mechanic," continues Tomm. "This helps define their personality from a gameplay standpoint. Then we find attacks or patterns that are suited to that core idea. I imagine the fight against different types of players, and shore up the boss' defences to 'outsmart' my imaginary players. It's a lot of fun once the boss is created to see how close I was! The last adjustment is tweaking the balance between Story/Arcade modes, as well as the difficulty level. Hopefully this helps them to evolve alongside player skill level, for memorable duels that maintain the *Contra* legacy." You'll be able to find out if Tomm and his team were successful as *Contra: Operation Galuga* is available now.

THE MAKING OF SLAVE ZERO

IN 1999, A SMALL TEAM AT ACCOLADE DECIDED TO DEVELOP WHAT WOULD BE THE DEFINITIVE MECHA ROBOT TITLE FOR SEGA DREAMCAST AND PC. A CROSSROAD BETWEEN WESTERN AND JAPANESE INSPIRATIONS, THE RESULT WAS SLAVE ZERO, A LATE-NINETIES CULT CLASSIC

WORDS BY DAMIANO GERLI

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** INFOGRAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** ACCOLADE
- **RELEASED:** 1999
- **PLATFORM:** DREAMCAST, PC
- **GENRE:** ACTION

In the future, man and machine will have to unite if they want to bring back peace and justice to our world. That was the main premise behind the story of *Slave Zero*, the shooting mecha action title developed by Accolade at the end of the Nineties. It took place in a dystopian world, 500 years in the future, a megacity dominated by the tyrannical Sovereign Khan. The rebellion against him will be brought by our protagonist by stealing the most sophisticated robot machine ever created. The title would go on to be released on PC first and was followed by a version for Sega's Dreamcast. A small, dedicated fanbase has kept interest in the cult game alive, which might explain why – 25 years later – the game is getting a prequel, in the form of *Slave Zero X*.

The original *Slave Zero* was developed by a small internal team of around 25-30 people at Accolade. Right from the get-go, it was being designed as a third-person action title, even though first-person was definitely more fashionable at the time. Ken Capelli, lead artist on *Slave Zero*, remembers that their team was a conglomeration of several other teams at Accolade following an internal restructuring. "Back then, the company was mostly known for driving games and sport games. I believe, overall, that *Slave Zero* was a way for them to vary their portfolio, something that was a bit more edgy and action than their usual games. I'm still thankful for them for going for that choice." He also remembers everyone on the team being "super weird", which made working on *Slave Zero* quite a fun experience.

"Originally, we were thinking of doing a cyberpunk bounty hunter title, with flashy 3D effects that would add to the player's enjoyment," but Ken mentions that every time they tried adding on more details to the scene, the framerate would drop dramatically. It was director Sean Vesce that had the idea of, instead of developing a high-poly count city with buildings, using low-poly for the crowd while making a huge mech run between buildings. "This way", continues Ken, "we could have small cars running around and lots of moving entities, all without sacrificing the framerate."

Ken also remembers the many inspirations he pulled from to make the game come together. "The first one for me was obviously the anime *Evangelion*, which back then was still not that popular in the US." The artist remembers long conversations while he was showing clips from battles in the anime by Hideaki Anno, but no one seemed to be happy with those influences. "They were all familiar with *MechWarrior*, but to incorporate and explain *Evangelion* I definitely had to fight for it. I really wanted to show what a fast hulking robot running through a city could look like, if done well."

The artist goes on to explain other influences which would inspire the design of *Slave Zero*, such as *Guyver* for the biomechanical look of the main character,

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ZERO TOLERANCE (PICTURED)
RELEASED: 1994
PLATFORM: MEGA DRIVE

DEADLOCK: PLANETARY CONQUEST
RELEASED: 1996
PLATFORM: PC, MAC

DEADLOCK II: SHRINE WARS
RELEASED: 1998
PLATFORM: PC, MAC

> "TO HIM, THE ORIGINAL DESIGN FOR OUR LEAD CHARACTER LOOKED LIKE A VILLAIN, HE COULD NOT SEE HOW A PLAYER WOULD WANT TO MAKE A CHARACTER LIKE THAT WIN"
> KEN CAPELLI

ZERO

» [PC] There's not a lot of time to admire the pretty neon lights.

along with HR Giger. "The original look leaned way more heavily into the biopunk look, many on the team were goths at the time so we were all in love with how extreme the look was turning out." But, again, the ones in charge were not having it, with the president of Accolade, Jim Barnett, being particularly repelled by the original designs. Ken remembers Barnett calling the original design plainly disgusting, "It had female breasts, multiple teeth and human eyes. To him, it simply looked like a villain, and he could not see how a player would want to make a character like that win."

In the end, Accolade decided to do a focus test with a random bunch of gamers, together with a more generic audience, to see which look they liked more. "Despite core gamers loving the ultra-weird version, that still wasn't good enough. He told us, 'When I'm going to Walmart to sell this game, I cannot sell it with that face on because I just don't like it. Can't we have someone that just looks heroic?'" The artist remembers a whole session with him painting textures and modifying mesh with the president next to him. In the end, they decided for a much more classic masculine-jawed heroic design, saving the creepier biomechanical ones for the in-game enemies. "At the beginning, ▶

CONVERSION CAPERS

HOW DO THE PC AND DREAMCAST VERSIONS OF SLAVE ZERO STACK UP?

PC

The PC version of *Slave Zero* was the one the team finished first, featuring all the classic graphic options one might expect from a PC game. *Slave Zero* on PC features a higher resolution than its console counterpart, a smoother framerate with more polygons and models but, unfortunately, no co-op or multiplayer modes of any kind. Also, its original release was marred by a few bugs and, today, it is definitely not easy to run on modern PCs without the help of a few specific programs.

DREAMCAST

The Dreamcast version was the one that the team spent months polishing, after finishing work on the PC build. It runs quite smoothly on the Sega hardware using the Ecstasy 3D engine, which was also created to allow the original game to run for the underpowered console. *Slave Zero* would also end up being the only title developed with Ecstasy. Still, it does have to contend with the limitations of the console, looking quite less impressive compared to the PC version. It does have an exclusive split-screen co-op mode though.

» [PC] During cutscenes, *Slave Zero* goes to widescreen for a more cinematic look.

MECH ALTERNATIVES

WHAT OTHER MECH GAMES WAS SLAVE ZERO COMPETING AGAINST?

The developers of *Slave Zero* mentioned *MechWarrior* several times as the big influence and the one game they were competing against on release. Debuting in 1995, *MechWarrior 2* (below left) was a game-changer for the genre of big robot action. With the possibility of choosing different clans and full mech customisations, the Activision title was definitely the one to beat. It also featured full 3D environments, online multiplayer and also (later) added support for accelerated graphic cards. Much less known, but still quite fondly remembered by fans of the genre, is *Iron Soldier*. Released in 1994 exclusively for the Atari Jaguar, it was a mech sim played from an in-cockpit view with a full 3D engine and single-player missions with various objectives to complete. Also, let's not forget Monolith's *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division* (below right). Released in 1998, *Shogo*, despite really being a first-person shooter at heart, was the first game to incorporate ideas from both anime and *MechWarrior*, with sequences where you're able to ride a mech around in a fully 3D environment. Finally, Italian software house Milestone, better known for the *Screamer* racing series, also released its own homage to *MechWarrior*, the 1995 shooter *Iron Assault* which featured a faux-3D engine similar to that of *Wolfenstein 3D*.

» [PC] Death from above is coming to our enemies.

"IT WAS DEFINITELY THE LAST TIME I POURED MY HEART AND SOUL INTO DOING SOMETHING THAT SOMEONE ELSE WOULD OWN"
KEN CAPELLI

» [PC] Strafing is your main way to dodge bullets and something to learn very fast.

I was quite pissed off but, over time, I learned to be less grumpy about it," Ken admits. "But it was definitely the last time I poured my heart and soul into doing something that someone else would own."

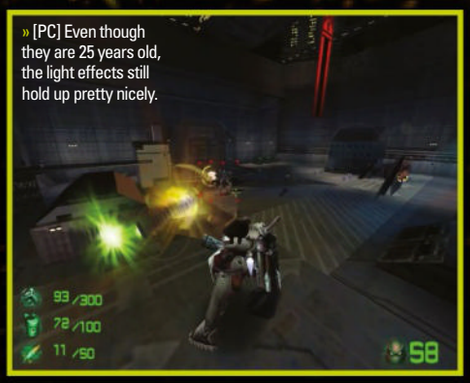
Lee Petty worked on the in-game cinematics of *Slave Zero*, telling us, "I was on a different project, an instalment of *Star Control*, I believe the fourth, that had been in development for quite a while. In the end, it was decided to shelve that project, so I was put to work on *Slave Zero*, which was simply called *Slave* at that moment." Lee rebuilt the character model for the pre-rendered in-game cinematics, along with contributing for the final design that ended up on the box art for *Slave Zero*.

Ken remembers the release of *Slave Zero* on Sega's Dreamcast as something of a delicate story for Accolade. "It was an old debt from the days of the Sega Genesis carts, which Accolade was still paying to Sega and went on even after the acquisition by Infogrames. So, at the end of the Nineties, Sega was quite hungry to find developers which would put titles on their Dreamcast. Basically, they told the company that if they managed to release *Slave Zero* and make it an original launch title for the Dreamcast, they would finally cancel that debt. So the producers were on our backs to make us finish the Dreamcast version as quickly as possible."

Finishing the main development of the game in late-1998, *Slave Zero* originally carried a release date of March 1999, as the months before launch were supposed to be spent testing the game. "But in the end the producers decided to delay it to November, so that we could take advantage of the Christmas period," recalls Ken. "That was a wasted moment, since we simply spent the next six months optimising *Slave Zero* for the Dreamcast. That's why we also designed an exclusive split-screen local co-op mode for the console version."

But in the end, this delay did not help at all. "The marketing budget was all for

» [PC] The feeling of being in a giant mech towering over the streets is beautifully rendered.



» [PC] Even though they are 25 years old, the light effects still hold up pretty nicely.

the Dreamcast version, which ended up selling better," continues Ken. "But the PC version was definitely the superior one, the Dreamcast was an emptier, low-res experience which – somehow – sold better simply because PC owners did not know that *Slave Zero* was out since there was little to no marketing done for that version! It kills me that it ended up like this only because the managers were paying attention."

But, those months spent exclusively working on the Dreamcast port despite being "boring and painful" as Ken remembered them, also were starting to show something new. "We were already thinking of a sequel, we could rebuild everything and make it bigger, finish some of the levels we were planning on. But unfortunately, we had a very strict mandate from the company: ship the Dreamcast version."

Despite the team being very passionate about what they were building, working long hours and being a very tight community, the producers were still adamant. "They would not let us improve the game in any significant way, nor start work on something else. Instead, they told us to wait until we get the feedback from QA, then spend time fixing the bugs that they would point out and that was it."

Ken remembers the team was already aware of some of the issues, "We definitely wanted to fix the overall repetitiveness, make the boss fights more interesting," he admits. The team was also aware of the reviews, which did note that the game looked interesting, it was fun to play, but overall quite boring. "I remember one review saying if one just played the demo 30 times, it would be the same thing as buying the full game. And they were pretty fair, indeed we had to build the whole game through with the team, for us we were doing something kinda new, a 3D shooter action game with some platforming. Overall, I still feel that we did well with those mechanics for the time, but we definitely did not manage to build enough variety."

» [PC] A boss fight against a generator is definitely a classic in a mecha game.

» [PC] From sewers to an industrial complex, you'll be fighting all over the city in *Slave Zero*.

» [PC] The final fight against the evil Sovkhan will make you feel pretty small. For once.

» [PC] A robot in chains? That won't last long unfortunately.

» [PC] Fighting multiple enemies at once is the soup du jour in *Zero X*.

X MARKS THE SPOT

THE ELEMENTS THAT MAKE SLAVE ZERO X A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE FROM ITS PREDECESSOR

A BRUTAL FIGHTING SYSTEM

■ *X* ditches its prequel shooter mechanics for gameplay that feels somewhere in-between *Strider* and *Devil May Cry*. It features brutal 2D melee fighting with little room for mistakes, requiring the player to master its controls.

NINETIES-STYLED 2.5D PIXELATED GRAPHICS

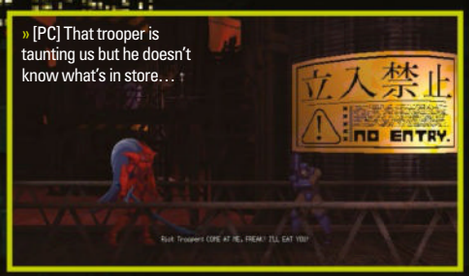
■ While *Slave Zero* featured an impressive (for the time) 3D engine, *X* goes for a retro 2.5D look. It features 2D sprites for all the characters, imposed on a 3D background, since the team wanted to go for the look of a Nineties game.

NARRATIVE CUTSCENES

■ As opposed to the in-game cutscenes of *Slave Zero*, *X* goes in quite the different direction. Along with a more extreme tone and look, dialogue happens both during gameplay and also in specific narrative cutscenes with character portraits drawn in a distinctive anime style.

» [PC] Lamp oil, rope and bombs? Hmm… where have I heard that one before?

» [PC] *Slave Zero X* includes a training room to try out some combos and special moves.



» [PC] That trooper is taunting us but he doesn't know what's in store…

▶ While the reviews did indeed mention how good *Slave Zero* looked, they were all pretty much average, with 3.5 out of 5 and 7s out of 10, which the team remembers being a bit bummed out on. "Everyone said it looked great, but that's why we wanted to fix it. We thought we had a window of opportunity, but the company just wanted to clear up the Infogrames acquisition and then move on to the next thing."

> "SLAVE ZERO X, 20 YEARS ON, IS ANOTHER PART OF THAT ONGOING CONVERSATION BETWEEN WESTERN AND JAPANESE CREATORS"
> FRANCINE BRIDGES

***Slave Zero* would be the final game that both Lee and Ken worked on, with Ken moving to Planet Moon, as he remembers when he was shown an in-progress version of *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*.** "When I saw this blue sky mermaid against the pink sky, I felt like the biggest departure from everything *Slave Zero* related. I ended up rebuilding, with some exceptions, most of the art. It was a huge departure from everything I had been working on up until then, it felt like a breath of fresh air to dive into something so completely weird."

Ken also says that until the internet, many years after the release of the game, he was not aware that anyone had even played *Slave Zero* at all. "Back then, it felt just like screaming in the void. But then I heard of this prequel and for a very brief moment, I was taken aback, but then I looked closer and *Slave Zero X* does look a bit like our game."

Slave Zero X, released in 2024, was developed as a prequel to *Slave Zero* by team Poppy Works. Francine Bridge, lead artist on *Slave Zero X*, mentions, "I felt incredibly lucky to have this opportunity, before Poppy Works I had been working on a handful of things as a freelance artist. But I was always in love with the original *Slave Zero*, it felt like an intense roaring reaction to the influx of Japanese media that was arriving in the US. I grew up in the environment of early anime stuff, the first years of my life were filled with that. I wanted to do the modern equivalent."

Slave Zero X feels like an opportunity to go back to that original conversation between Japanese and Western developers. "We're drawing from the same influences, but adding even more niche influences," Francine continues. "I think if someone saw *Slave Zero* when they were 13 and thought it was the coolest thing ever as Zero trampled over the city and jetted through a hail of fire from a horde of metallic spiders, I would hope that they would likewise feel the same when Shou's fist crumples a cyborg cop's body. He explodes into four ribcages at once. We speak the same language of cool."

Cole Law, marketing coordinator at Ziggurat Interactive, explains how, "To honour and revisit the world of *Slave Zero* in this prequel, we wanted to create human stories… or… in this case, human emotions blighted by a sentient biomech suit. While *Slave Zero* established a world plagued by the SovKhan and his army, the player pilots a large captured Slave unit and we wanted to shift the perspective literally and figuratively to tell a new story in the same fight."

As for *X* being quite brutal with its difficulty, Francine feels unapologetic for some of its design, "I feel like we're reaching the people who live for that kind of heat, who spend hours developing complex combo charts and showing off their skills in exhibition videos, those people are the best ambassadors we could possibly have."

Finally, Lee and Ken share a moment of clarity when they realise how they were both inspired by a Japanese artist. "There is a specific garage kit, a model made by a designer from Japan named Yasushi Nirasawa. There's a particular kit he made, Phancure (short for Phantom Core)… this huge, hulking, biomutant type of whatever with this massive upper torso and long arms with talons on the end," says Lee. "You can see the ghost of the original game's design in there. I spent ages thinking to myself if that inspired *Slave Zero*. And it was great to confirm that Ken got that very same inspiration!" ✱

A FIGHTING FOCUS

■ As opposed to the open space and shooting mechanics of *Slave Zero*, *X* makes melee fighting the main focus. There are some short platforming sequences, but 90% of the game is all about stringing combos and special moves together to pummel your enemies.

PREQUEL STORY

■ *Slave Zero X* brings the story of the game before the events of *Slave Zero* even happened, telling a similar story of a lone warrior, Shou, who decided to rebel against the tyrannical empire of Sovereign Khan, using a biomech unit.

Shadow Of Rome

A GAME OF TWO HALVES

» RETROREVIVAL

» PLAYSTATION 2 » 2005 » CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 2

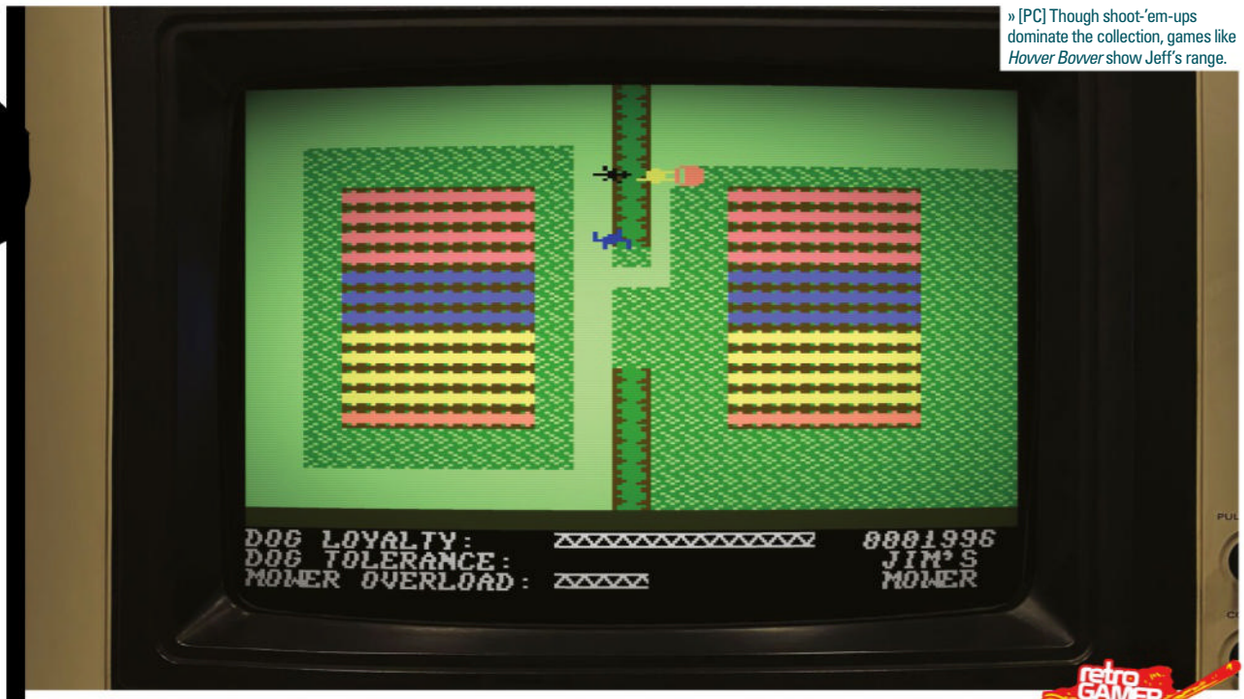
Some games have great concepts and ideas that never live up to their potential – *Shadow Of Rome* is one such game. Tasked with creating a game that would appeal to Western audiences, Motohide Eshiro's team came up with a fictionalised version of Julius Caesar's assassination which would follow two characters and see players switching between them. Agrippa is a burly Roman centurion who soon falls foul of the scheming senate when his father is accused of Caesar's murder, while Octavianus is Agrippa's best friend and Caesar's nephew who suspects foul play and attempts to clear his friend's name.

Shadow Of Rome's leads couldn't be more different and this is mirrored by the game mechanics they utilise. Agrippa's story threads are combat based allowing him to brutally show off the excellent fighting engine at *Shadow Of Rome*'s core. The shamed centurion has a wondrous number of devastating attacks at his disposal and can effortlessly dismember opponents with the right weapon, showering the screen with blood and gore as he continues his single-minded quest for revenge. Once he becomes a slave and is inducted into arena fights and chariot races he can use his showy moves to appeal to the crowd who will show their approval by throwing down weapons or even food for him to use.

Sadly, Octavianus' sections are far more frustrating to play, largely down to poorly implemented stealth mechanics. Octavianus' slight frame means he can't directly take on the many guards that patrol key locations of the senate, so he has to rely on his sneaking skills, or a bottle to the back of a guard's head when he's feeling brave. He can dress up in robes or armour to pass himself off as a servant or guard, but odds are he'll get caught by the inconsistent AI, meaning you have to do the whole frustrating sequence again.

Fortunately, the vast majority of the game focusses on Agrippa and those sections are lots of fun to experience, even if there are some brutal difficulty humps along the way. Despite being the start of a planned series, *Shadow Of Rome*'s sequel was cancelled due to poor sales of the original and it evolved into *Dead Rising* in the process. Now that's a story we'd love to cover in a later issue of the mag.

» Llamasoft receives a spectacular celebration courtesy of Digital Eclipse this month – read on to find out just how good it is. Over the page, you'll find Tomb Raider I-III Remastered, Princess Peach: Showtime and much more



» [PC] Though shoot-'em-ups dominate the collection, games like *Hovver Bovver* show Jeff's range.

retro GAMER SIZZLER

Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story

WE WON'T STOP YAKKING ABOUT THIS ANY TIME SOON

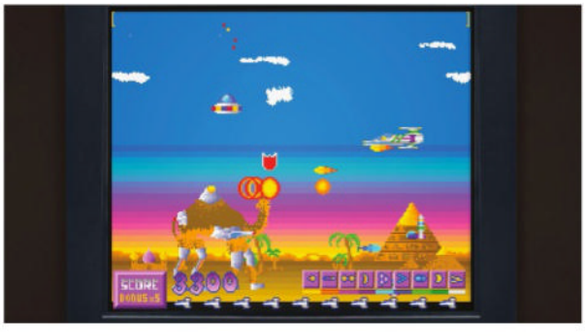
INFORMATION

- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X/S, SWITCH
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £24.99
- **DEVELOPER:** DIGITAL ECLIPSE
- **PUBLISHER:** DIGITAL ECLIPSE
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

Jeff Minter is a legend among game creators, and for good reason. From the Eighties heyday of the bedroom coder to the present day, he has developed highly distinctive games that combine his AAA passions – and by that we mean arcade games, animals and abstract visuals. Put simply, you know a Llamasoft game when you see one, and the fact that he's done all this while remaining independent for almost his entire career makes it all the more worthy of celebration. Enter Digital Eclipse, which has chosen to present Jeff Minter's story in the interactive documentary format that it pioneered with *Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration* a couple of years ago. That means a timeline format, peppered with video clips, photos, quotes, detailed 3D recreations of old cassette cases and, of course, playable games.

For our money, this is still the most ideal way to present a body of work like this since it gives plenty of context for each game, but Jeff himself helps by being so frank about everything – he's open about what he likes, but doesn't try to pretend that he loves games that he's not so fond of.

Of course, you can just jump into the list of games, and if you go down that route there are 42 to be found, originating from the ZX81, ZX Spectrum, VIC-20, Commodore 64, Atari 8-bit, Atari ST and Atari Jaguar and Konix Multisystem. That last one is



» [PC] The emulation of the unreleased Konix Multisystem is game preservation at its finest.

BRIEF HISTORY

» Having pioneered the interactive documentary format with *Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration*, Digital Eclipse chose to apply that template to other stories in its Gold Master series. The first entry in the series was *The Making Of Karateka*, which examined the creation of Jordan Mechner's classic game. *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story* is the second entry in this series, and broadens the scope to a whole body of work.

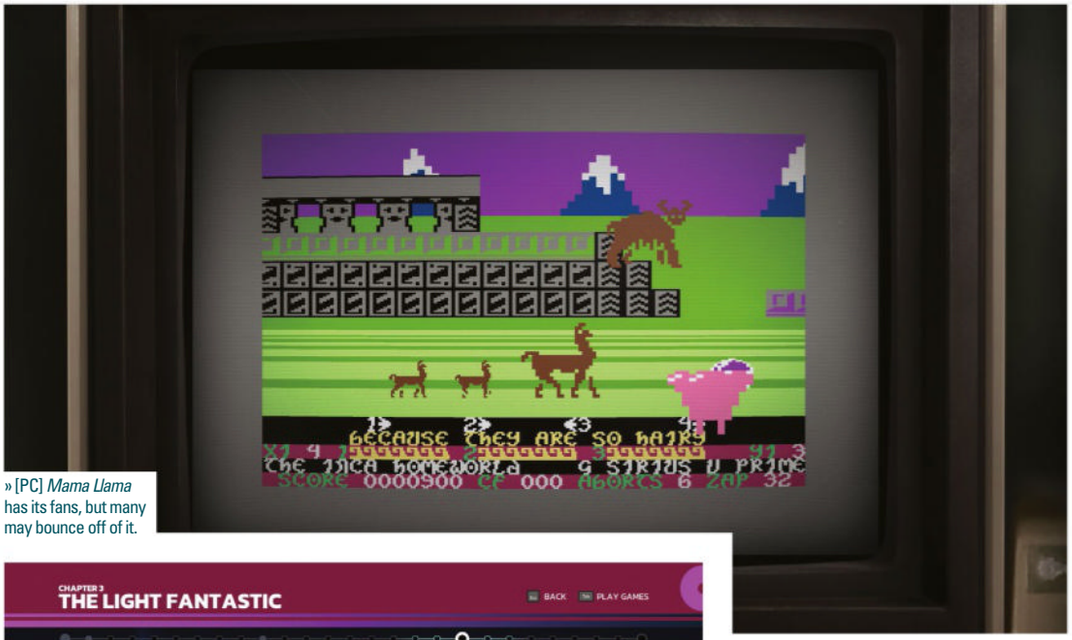
✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story
Digital Eclipse continues to show everyone else how retro compilations should be made. It's a stunning showcase of a true gaming legend.

NICK

Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story
This would be worth it for *Tempest 2000* alone, but the whole package just shows why Digital Eclipse is the best in the business right now.



» [PC] *Mama Llama* has its fans, but many may bounce off of it.

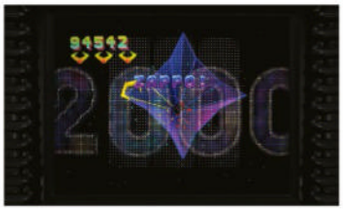
CHAPTER 3
THE LIGHT FANTASTIC
BACK
PLAY GAMES
1986
Viva Vic!
With the Commodore VIC-20 winding down in the marketplace and some of Llamasoft's games having gone out of print, it released a compilation cassette called Viva Vic. Notable here are the liner notes, which comprise a historical look back at the importance of the VIC-20 as well as Jeff's thoughts on each of the eight games.
VIVA VIC!
ZOOM

» [PC] Grouping related games, art and stories on the timeline makes Jeff's story easy to follow.

easily the most notable inclusion because the console famously never saw release, and though *Attack Of The Mutant Camels 89* is really not much more than a demo, the fact that it's playable here for the first time really shows the effort that has been made with this collection. It's also why we prefer the timeline approach – understanding how this development affected Jeff's business gives you a perspective beyond 'wow, that's neat'.

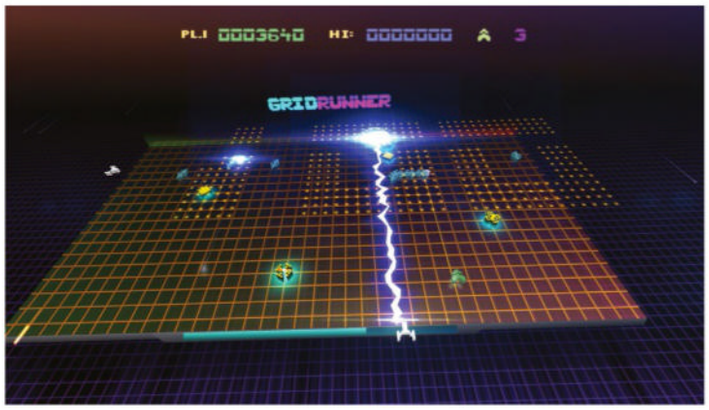
As for the rest of the list, you'll find that versions of the same game on different platforms account for some of the game count, with the likes of *Hovver Bovver* and *Metagalactic Llamas At The Edge Of Time* appearing more than once. You'll still find plenty of games that play brilliantly today, with highlights including *Gridrunner*, *Attack Of The Mutant Camels*, *Llamatron: 2112*, *Tempest 2000* and the light synth *Psychedelia*. A bonus game, *Gridrunner Remastered*, adds 3D visuals to the classic shooter and is also well worth your time.

Where Digital Eclipse has done an especially brilliant job this time around is in adapting games for play on modern controllers, since the vast majority of the games in this collection originated on 8-bit computers. Despite this, some of them really do warrant a look at the instructions – *Mama Llama* being a good example – and complexity ratings have been assigned to each game to sort the immediate blasters from the games requiring more patience. Certain games also have optional enhancements available, ranging from nice extras like *Tempest 2000*'s framerate boost to near-essential changes to the controls in 3D3D.



» [PC] *Tempest 2000* is here, with the same framerate enhancements and analogue control as in *Atari 50*.

We don't really have many complaints to offer. It's fair to say that the list of games includes some low points, but Jeff himself would tell you that, and their inclusion is important to the story being told. With that in mind, all we could really want is more of this – since the playable games conclude with *Tempest 2000*, we're left without the likes of *Gridrunner++*, or any in-depth discussion of the cancelled GameCube project *Unity*. Then again, with the rights issues involved in including *Defender 2000* or the development challenges that *Tempest 3000* and *Space Giraffe* would pose, it's easy to understand why the documentary doesn't go further – and the later games are at least acknowledged. Even if you're not familiar with Jeff Minter's games, we seriously recommend *Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story* to anyone with an interest in the history of videogames. Sure, it's packed with some classic shoot-'em-ups and plenty of furry creatures, but it's so much more than that – it's a celebration of a unique creative talent, an invaluable insight into the burgeoning British computer games business of the Eighties, and a masterclass in how historical context can elevate the presentation of classic games. ✱



» [PC] *Gridrunner Remastered* is based on the Commodore 64 code, with a 3D makeover.

In a nutshell

A Llamasoft compilation on its own would have had value, but Digital Eclipse's interactive documentary format makes it essential, and an example for developers of other retro collections to follow.

» Score **93%**

PICK OF THE MONTH

Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster

WITNESS THE TRUE POWER OF NIGHTDIVE'S FULLY OPERATIONAL REMASTER

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS5, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £24.99
- **PUBLISHER:** NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER:** NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS
- **PLAYERS:** 1

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

▼ SOMETHING NEW
POWERSLAVE EXHUMED

BRIEF HISTORY

» In a sea of *Doom*-clones, *Dark Forces* instantly stood out thanks to its graphical enhancements, clever level design and a deep focus on story. It was followed by *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* in 1997 and concluded with *Jedi Academy* in 2003. This marks the first time Nightdive Studios has been given access to the *Star Wars* universe. Hopefully it won't be the last.

When it comes to remastering classic games, Nightdive Studios certainly has a good track record. Its latest effort is the modernisation of LucasArts' iconic first-person shooter and while elements of it have certainly aged, Nightdive has done everything it can to make *Dark Forces* feel as fresh and exciting as it did in 1995.

The first thing you'll notice is just how clean it now looks. Coded using the versatile KEX Engine, Nightdive's remaster offers output up to 4K and can run up to a silky-smooth 120fps on relevant systems, while 3D rendering is utilised to offer some extremely atmospheric lighting effects throughout Kyle Katarn's adventure. The game's cutscenes have been completely redone as well, and while they drew some criticism on release, they do a great job of expanding the mood of *Dark Forces*' (then ambitious) storyline. Still, if you do want to party like it's 1995 you can switch all enhancements off or simply toggle between them using the F2 button. There are even multiple ways to experience *Dark Forces*' MIDI soundtrack, so the classic game feels as authentic as possible.

Nightdive has done a lot more than simply spruce up *Dark Forces*' visuals though and it has added a huge number of quality-of-life enhancements to make your fight against the Empire that little bit easier, particularly if you prefer using a controller. Weapon selection is super easy using a pad thanks to a weapon wheel being implemented, while useful items like night-vision goggles, gas masks and the game's map are assigned to the d-pad. There's a variety of customisation options that change everything from the shape and colour of your targeting reticule to turning off view bobbing and weapon/HUD flashing, while autorun and crouching can be easily toggled on and off as well.

It's worth remembering that for all the aesthetic and mechanical improvements Nightdive has made, the core game remains untouched and while it's still a lot of fun, elements of *Dark Forces* are showing their age. It's still just as easy to get lost in some of the game's labyrinth-like levels as it was in 1995, while the sections that require precise jumping have aged like sour milk. Many of the switch-focussed puzzles also start to run out of steam as you get to the game's finale as well. Thankfully, the combat at *Dark Forces*' core remains challenging and while the AI won't test you too much on the game's default settings, things certainly ramp up on the later difficulty levels.

Once you've mastered *Dark Forces*' 14 stages there's the superb Vault to play around with. Thanks to some excellent access, Nightdive has trawled through LucasArts' archives to include a variety of stills, production shots and even short videos on how *Dark Forces* was made. Best of all though is the inclusion of The Avenger, a lost demo level from CES that was omitted from the final game after being considered too hard. The end result is another classic game that's been given a remarkably thorough makeover by one of the best restoration studios in the business.

» [PC] Having the lost The Avenger stage included is a great bonus, and yes, it's as hard as promised.

» [PC] *Dark Forces*' weapons are still great fun to use. This poor Borg has been well and truly assimilated.

» [PC] Shockingly, no hands were washed when these enemies returned fire.

In a nutshell

It's showing its age in places, but *Dark Forces Remaster* is another epic offering from Nightdive Studios, which looks and plays better than you remember.

>> Score **87%**

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AND THE REST...

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered

» **Buy it for:** Switch (version tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, PC » **Buy it for:** £26.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

The original *Tomb Raider* adventures were groundbreaking back in the Nineties, offering 3D environments that contemporaries rarely matched and catapulting Lara Croft to superstardom.

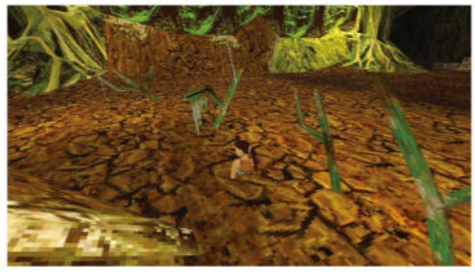
Now the first three games are back, complete with a new coat of paint and a new control scheme designed to modernise the experience somewhat. Authenticity is the watchword in this remaster. You can switch between the classic and modern graphics mid-game, and you'll find the updated mode has added lighting and new high-resolution textures that have been designed to mimic the old ones – and in some cases, that extends to previously flat details such as walls of skulls being given full modelling. Lara also gets an upgrade to her appearance, with a look somewhere between her CGI renders and the *Tomb Raider: Legend*-era model, and the original FMV sequences are included too.

Level designs have been completely preserved, and this is where your enjoyment of the game is likely to vary. The modern control scheme gives you simplified analogue control over Lara, akin to the later games in the series, but the grid-based structure of each stage requires quite a lot of precision even for simple interactions like activating switches, grabbing ledges and so on.

There's a good deal of value to be had here, as this collection includes the original expansion packs for all three games, which were PC exclusives back in the Nineties. It's also fair to say that the classic moments are as fantastic as they ever were. However, these do feel decidedly like games of a different time and the unchanged level designs conflict with attempts to modernise the controls, so this is best for existing fans or players who can tolerate a period of adjustment.

» Score **76%**

» [Switch] Outdoor sections of the original *Tomb Raider* have a visible sky for the first time.



» [Switch] Classic graphics fall somewhere between the original PlayStation and PC versions.

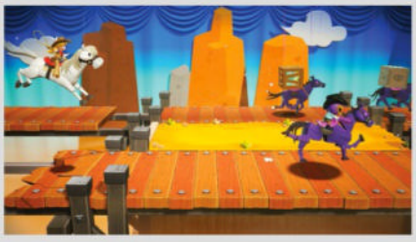
Piko Interactive Collection 4

» **System:** Evercade series » **Buy it for:** £17.99
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail

Released alongside *Sunsoft Collection 2*, this is a delightful collection of quirky oddities. *Glover* is the first N64 game to appear on the Evercade and its new digital controls work quite well. Other highlights include *Street Racer* and *Zero Tolerance: Underground*, a lost Mega Drive game that was released in 2022. *Star X* is a decent shooter, *Risky Woods* is a take on *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, while *Mermaids Of Atlantis* is a fun puzzle game. We also enjoyed the action platformer *Sküljagger. Target: Renegade* and *Bad Street Brawler* are showing their age, while *The Fidgets* is a character-swapping puzzle game that we didn't really like. There's more hits than misses here though, meaning it's an easy recommendation from us.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **82%**



Princess Peach: Showtime!

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it for:** £49.99
» **Buy it from:** Retail, eShop

Princess Peach ditches her usual role of damsel in distress here to take centre stage for only the second time in her career, and she's more than suited to the role. Fending off Madame Grape and the Sour Bunch requires her to don the costumes of ten different theatre stars, each with their own associated mechanics – Ninja Peach has stealth gameplay, Detective Peach solves puzzles, and so on. The level of challenge here is decidedly gentle, but if you're happy with that you should find that the game's wealth of ideas, charming presentation and high level of polish are enough to keep you seated until the final act.

NICK THORPE

» Score **80%**

Top Racer Collection

» **System:** PS5 (tested), PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X, PC, Switch
» **Buy it for:** £15.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

QuByte Interactive's latest collection offers slick 16-bit racing. It gathers together *Top Racer*, *Top Racer 2*, *Top Racer 3000* and *Top Racer Crossroads* (sadly, just *Top Racer* with four new cars). While *Top Racer* is the highlight, *Top Racer 2* is a lot of fun too with good additions like buying upgrades and car damage, which leaves *Top Racer 3000*, an average futuristic take on the series. Outside of the solid emulation various changes have been made such as new menus for selecting cars, creation custom tracks, quick races and time trials – there's even the option to play online. The games may be showing their age, but this is arguably the best way to enjoy them now.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **74%**

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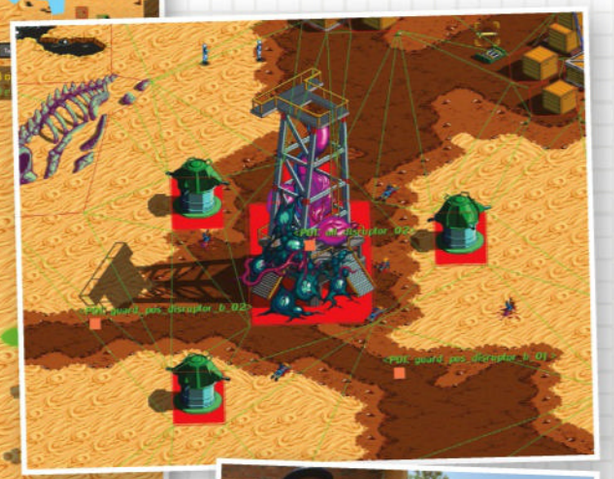
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>

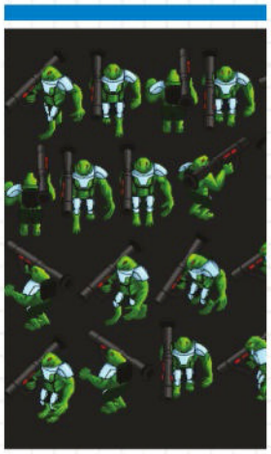
<!--- [PC] THE BOSS QUEEN OLLDUSA IN ALL HER SNAKE-LIKE BEAUTY. --->



<!--- [PC] THE CUSTOM MISSION EDITOR, WITH MESH LINES FOR PATHING AND POINTS OF INTEREST. --->

<!--- PIZZA BEAR GAMES ARE GABE MILLER (LEFT) AND NICK HUNTER. --->

<INTRO> SOCIAL MEDIA CAN BE A GREAT WAY TO PROMOTE YOUR HOMEBREW. MEGACOPTER'S CREATORS SHARED PLENTY OF SCREENSHOTS AND VIDEOS ON X/TWITTER, AND KIRITO'S COMIC-BOOK VISUALS STOOD OUT FOR THE MEGA DRIVE. THERE IS A DEDICATED FACEBOOK PAGE FOR THE MULTI-PLATFORM ARCADE GAME DESIGNER AND OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES. DISCORD CAN CONNECT YOU WITH FANS DURING DEVELOPMENT, AND HELP REVIEWERS FIND YOUR TITLES. ENJOY THIS ISSUE'S SELECTION OF GAMES AND SEE YOU NEXT TIME! </INTRO>



<!--- THE SPRITESHEET OF A REPTOID ARMED WITH A ROCKET LAUNCHER, SHOWING THE MANY ANGLES NEEDED. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

MEGACOPTER MAYHEM

<INTRO> PIZZA BEAR GAMES DREW INSPIRATION FROM DESERT STRIKE AND ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY TO CREATE MEGACOPTER: BLADES OF THE GODDESS </INTRO>

<BODY> ***Megacopter*'s concept started as a joke.** "We were working on educational games at the University Of Oklahoma and started joking about an evil helicopter with ancient origins," explains Gabe Miller. "As children of the Eighties, attack helicopters held a place in our hearts and the sentient vehicle genre is one of my favourites. *Megacopter* was originally drafted where half of the time you were infiltrating buildings as a 2D side-scroller. We decided to cut that in favour of focussing on helicopter combat – the art evolved into an isometric style very reminiscent of the *Strike* series."

What can't be found in the *Strike* series is *Megacopter*'s unusual mix of Aztec legend and alien enemies. "I have always been fascinated by the history of warfare and indigenous cultures," continues Gabe. "The myriad of insane YouTube documentaries have all mixed into a soup that always floats around in my head. Nick [Hunter] wanted the helicopter to have more of a personality. So, why not an Aztec goddess?"

So what technical elements are being used for *Megacopter*? "The art is a combination of Blender 3D, Photoshop and Spine 2D," says Nick Hunter. "There are four major biomes including desert, urban, ocean and wasteland. Each has its own tileset and props. Gabe created animated cinematics for major story points and 'talking head' portraits that tell the story. We utilised libGDX as our 2D game engine and the Spine 2D runtime for animating complex assets like bosses and parts of the UI. We developed our mission map editor that integrates tileset editing, object placement and other aspects of mission design."

Those missions are an interesting mix as you gradually upgrade your Megacopter and learn more of its supernatural abilities (such as a dodge fuelled by enemy blood). "One of my favourite objectives in the *Strike* series was rescuing POWs, so we

FLIGHT FEATURES

CUTSCENES

<Clever animated cutscenes appear in the intro and between missions to advance the storyline. />

DIALOGUE

<The General and other characters – including the Megacopter itself – give you updates during the mission. />

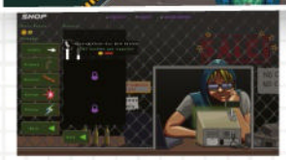
NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [PC] PLACING PROPS IN A LEVEL USING THE MISSION EDITOR. --->

<!--- [PC] BEFORE A MISSION, THE PLAYER CAN CHANGE THE WEAPON LOADOUT. --->

<!--- [PC] ESOTERIC SOFTWARE'S SPINE IS USED TO CREATE SKELETAL FRAMES FOR ANIMATING THE QUEEN OLLDUSA BOSS. --->



<!--- [PC] YOU CAN EARN PIZZA TOKENS FROM COMPLETED MISSIONS TO BUY NEW UPGRADES. --->

have a mission focussed on that," Nick reveals. "There was also an *Urban Strike* mission to defend a Russian sub – we made the idea into a tower defence-style minigame."

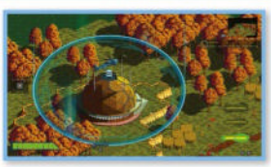
Megacopter's audio was composed by OGRE Sound. "We liked the soundtrack of *Big Trouble In Little China*," says Nick. "It has such a great combination of mystery and action. Our first choice was OGRE Sound, we approached him with an initial direction, and he ran wild with it. It was an honour to work with him, the soundtrack is next level. You can purchase the *Megacopter* soundtrack through Bandcamp." And this may not be the end of the story, as Nick teases. "I would love to add other game modes post-launch if there's enough interest. If I could make a sequel to *Megacopter*, I'd love to support multiplayer as a central feature and continue the story."

Megacopter takes flight in June when it launches on Steam and is hoping to be part of the Summer Next Fest. Look out for a review soon. </BODY>

<INTRO> HOW MEGACOPTER BUILDS ON THE STRIKE SERIES LEGACY </INTRO>

TUTORIAL

<The tutorial mission helps you learn to fly the Megacopter, with visible button prompts and target practice. />

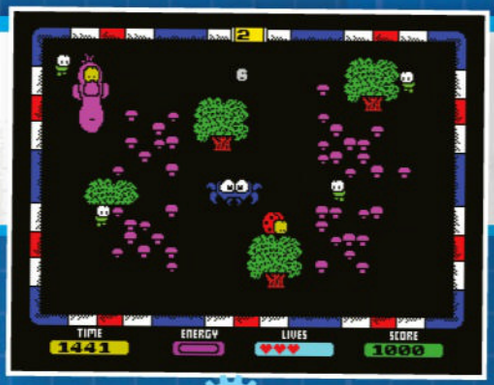


FOG OF WAR

<Not all of the map is visible until you explore; hacking the Surveillance Towers reveals more of the current level (and enemy positions). />

MIXED MISSIONS

<Among the traditional rescue and destructive missions, a tower defence mission sees you using movable flame towers to protect the Pizza Bear. />



NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Amstrad CPC:** *Foggy's Quest* has jumped from the ZX Spectrum to the Amstrad, thanks to Cyrille Ayor61. Cartridge and tape images can be found at bit.ly/foggy-cpc />

<**Atari ST:** Haplo brings dungeon puzzler *Tenebra* to Atari's machine, with classic and remastered graphics. Choose your price and get it from bit.ly/tenebra />

<**Commander X-16:** Jimbo's latest for the machine is *Tower Defender*, inspired by his earlier PET desktop tower defence game. Try it out at bit.ly/tower-x16 />

<**Dreamcast:** The Dreamcast Junkyard has put together a massive guide to the last 20 years of indie games on the Sega machine. You can read it at bit.ly/indie-dreamcast />

<**Game Boy:** *Lee Carvallo's Putting Challenge 2* is a clever point-and-click inspired by an episode of *The Simpsons*. Play it at bit.ly/putting2 />

<**MSX2:** *Phenix Corrupta* by Casper Croes is available as a digital download and a limited-edition premium cartridge from Côté Gamers. Purchase it from bit.ly/phenix-msx2 />

<**NES:** Lowtek Games released a demo of *Flea 2* before the Kickstarter campaign. Hop on over to bit.ly/flea2-demo />

<**PICO-8:** *Bomb Jack* is the latest arcade conversion from Paul Hammond. Get defusing by visiting bit.ly/bombjack-p8 />

<**PlayStation:** 3D puzzle game *Mike Visor* was the first submission to the Net Yaroze 2023 Jam, which ended in February. There's more info at bit.ly/yaroze2023 />

<**Various:** The BASIC 10Liner Competition 2024 is underway. Follow it at bunsen.itch.io />

<**ZX Spectrum:** Blast those *Mutant Mushrooms* and avoid the giant bugs (pictured above) in the stylish *Robotron*-inspired 128K game from The Death Squad. Name your price and get blasting at bit.ly/mushrooms-zx
For another arcade experience, there's Marco Leal's brilliant *Pac-Man Arcade* for 48K. Play it at bit.ly/pac-zx />

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CHAMPION CODER

JONATHAN CAULDWELL

<INTRO> AS MPAGD HITS 10,000 DOWNLOADS, JONATHAN TALKS ABOUT THE VERSATILITY OF HIS POPULAR GAME DESIGNERS </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: ENGLAND WEBSITES: SPANGLEFISH.COM/EGGHEAD BIT.LY/MPAGD FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM, ZX81, VARIOUS PREVIOUS GAME: ARCADE GAME DESIGNER (ZX SPECTRUM) WORKING ON: MULTI-PLATFORM ARCADE GAME DESIGNER (PC) />

<!--- JONATHAN HAS RELEASED OVER 80 GAMES AND UTILITIES HIMSELF SINCE 1989. --->

WHERE DID THE ORIGINAL IDEA COME FROM?

<In 1984, I knew BASIC was no good for writing games but learning machine code was hard. I remember wanting a tool that would allow the user to create commercial-quality standalone games in a simple language. Years later I set out to create one first on the ZX Spectrum (AGD), then as a Windows tool that could be used to convert games to different formats. AGD has had a total rewrite for version 5 and is currently in the testing and bug-fixing stage. When that's done, I'll get around to updating MPAGD. Hopefully, we'll get volunteers to convert the engine and compiler to more machines too. />

HOW PLEASED ARE YOU THAT MPAGD HAS REACHED 10,000 DOWNLOADS?

<I never imagined it would reach a milestone like this. A large part of its success is undoubtedly down to the volunteers who have assisted with new machines, fonts, tutorials and of course the community who regularly release games. The important thing was to include functionality to import AGD games – so I could test that everything worked, but also these games could then be further extended. Kees van Oss (the guy responsible for the Acorn engines) utilised this functionality to convert hundreds of Spectrum AGD games to Acorn machines. />

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR FAVOURITE MPAGD GAMES?

<Anything with an original mechanic as that's what I look to do when I write a game. *Hedgehogs* is a brilliant puzzle game that I just love. *Duckstroma* had the player laying an egg that would explode after a few seconds, blasting him far higher than an ordinary jump could achieve; I really liked that idea. There are many others too, far too many to mention. />

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOMEONE STARTING OUT WITH MPAGD?

<Read the documentation in the download, it's comprehensive and each command has a code example. I'd absolutely recommend Bruce Groves' incredible tutorial at bit.ly/mpagd-tutorials />

<!--- [MSX] DRAGGING AND DROPPING CHARACTERS TO CREATE A SCREEN IN MPAGD. --->

<!--- [MSX] MANANUK'S BLACK SEA: TREASURE HUNTERS HAS APPEARED ACROSS MULTIPLE FORMATS THANKS TO MPAGD. --->

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] AB ULTRANARWHAL'S DUCKSTROMA PART 2 FEATURES EXPLODING EGGS ON BOTH SPECTRUM (SHOWN HERE) AND MSX. --->

DATA BURST

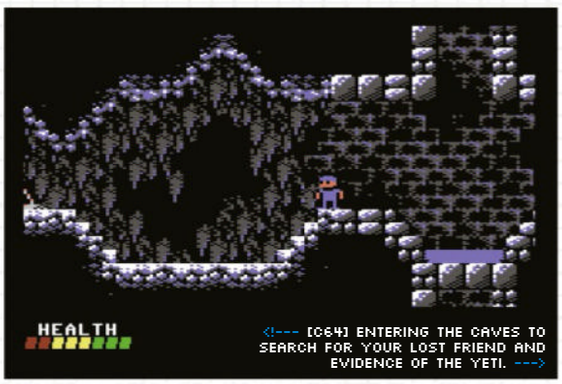
YETI MOUNTAIN

<INFO FORMAT: C64 CARTRIDGE / WINDOWS EXECUTABLE CREDITS: RUSSELL MILLS FOR PROTOVISION PRICE: DIGITAL DOWNLOAD $8.99 / PHYSICAL CART TBC WEB: BIT.LY/YETIMOUNTAIN />

<BODY> **When your friend Chris goes missing at Yeti Ski Lodge, you set out to find out why.** Exploring the area on foot, you can enter buildings and talk to people. When you acquire some skis, you hit the slopes to enter three styles of competition of increasing difficulty: Downhill, Slalom and Tricks. Winning is vital to persuade people to help as you search for evidence, with strange things happening in the huts and a mysterious stranger who needs to be persuaded to talk. Your quest sees you exploring caves where you discover ancient knowledge that helps you build your character's skills. You're soon outrunning a sudden avalanche and frantically powering up an Early Warning System to alert the lodge, but be careful, as you're not alone on the slopes. *Yeti Mountain*'s clever mix of RPG-style exploration and close-up pictures as you talk to people looks great, with the tricky skiing sections taking a good amount of time to master. You lose time whenever you're knocked out or fail so the included save option (to disk or the cartridge) is vital. Filled with interesting ideas and fun game mechanics, *Yeti Mountain* is well worth adding to your collection. </BODY>

SCORE: 88%

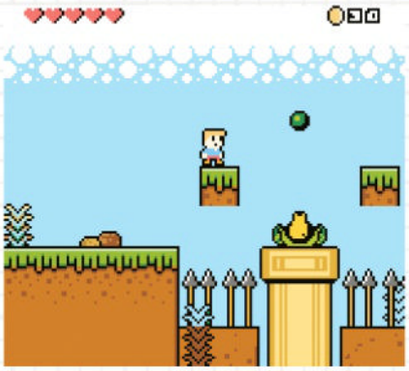
<!--- [C64] HITTING THE SLOPES TO WIN THE SLALOM COMPETITION. --->



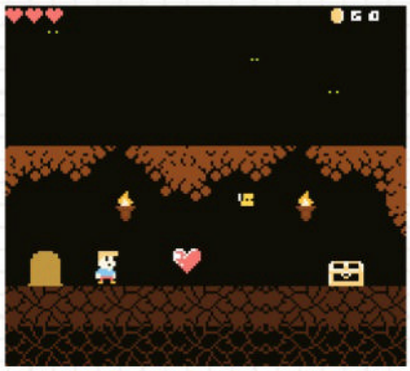
<!--- [C64] ENTERING THE CAVES TO SEARCH FOR YOUR LOST FRIEND AND EVIDENCE OF THE YETI. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**



<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] IN CLASSIC MARIO FASHION, AVOID SPIKES AND PLANTS SHOOTING AT YOU. --->



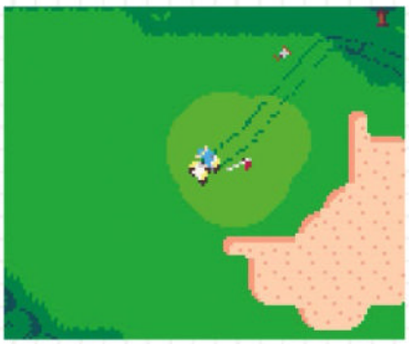
<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] YOU MUST FIND KEYS TO UNLOCK THE CHEST WHERE YOU CAN SAVE YOUR PROGRESS. --->

SERGIO KIDD

<INFO FORMAT: GAME BOY (DMG/COLOR COMPATIBLE) CREDITS: PONONO GAMES PRICE: DIGITAL DOWNLOAD €3.95 / PHYSICAL CART TBC WEB: BIT.LY/SERGIOKIDD />

<BODY> **When the king taxed the people, they rebelled – but the magician turned them into monsters and mushrooms!** Now a new champion must reach the castle to topple the greedy ruler. Sergio can pick up 100 coins to earn a new life, while hearts will replenish his lost energy. Moving across the overhead map reveals new platform-focussed levels to conquer and it's possible to save the game by visiting caves – providing Sergio has the required key. While we have niggles with *Sergio Kidd*'s control method and collision detection they do not take away from the cute graphic style and the quest facing you. This is a solid and fun take, although it does lack originality. </BODY>

SCORE: 73%



<!--- [PICO-8] SKID AROUND THE GREEN IN A GOLF BUGGY. --->

<!--- [PICO-8] TIME THE BUTTON PRESS TO SINK THE PERFECT PUTT. --->

GOLF MONDAY

FORMAT: STEAM/PICO-8 CREDITS: APSKEPPET (JOHAN PEITZ) PRICE: £4.29 (STEAM) / $4.95 (ITCH) WEB: BIT.LY/GOLFMONDAY JOHANPEITZ.ITCH.IO/GOLF-MONDAY

<BODY> **We're big fans of Johan's games, including the recent *Cosmic Combo* (iOS), so we enjoyed this relaxing overhead golf game that's filled with neat touches.** You can customise your golfer's appearance and choose between better power or aim (longer shots are inherently less accurate). Once on the course you can follow etiquette and let other players take their turn – or succumb to mischief, driving your golf buggy across the greens and hitting other balls into the water! Play a round of 9 or 18 holes and see where you end up on the leaderboard. </BODY>

SCORE: 80%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> COMIC-BOOK ANIMATION IS DEFINING TULFARED'S KIRITO ON THE MEGA DRIVE, WITH A KICKSTARTER COMING SOON </INTRO>

<BODY> **"The characters were intended for a comic strip," explains pixel-artist Ciberu.** "Kirito, a young enthusiast immersed in the world of retro gaming, takes the plunge into YouTube. Five seasoned YouTubers give him a beating as a lesson. How much are you willing to do to retrieve your games collection?" Tulfared has assembled a good team to make *Kirito*. "Our squad consists of Thulf, a seasoned coder, backed up by Fredoleponge (artificial intelligence), Rek1 Viskeux our resident musician using DefMask, and Fredial the testing maestro – we're all secretly envious of his flawless 1CC in *Final Fight*," says Ciberu. Development is in C using SGDK, with Ciberu creating his art using the iPad Procreate app. As for goals, Ciberu says Tulfared is keeping things simple. "We have only one goal: to deliver a game that's pure fun for you." So how is *Kirito* currently progressing? "We've been in the trenches for a little over a year on this project," says Ciberu. "A demo, serving as a prologue, is set to drop in May 2024 to kick-start our Kickstarter campaign. We're looking at around another year of development to wrap up everything." </BODY>

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] CHANGING WEATHER CONDITIONS AND HUGE BOSS CHARACTERS ADD TO THE POLISH OF KIRITO'S PIXEL ART. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

ESSENTIAL GAME BOY ADVANCE GAMES

The team highlight their favourite titles for Nintendo's classic handheld

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

[Game Boy Advance] *Metroid Fusion* was a great sequel by Nintendo.

t may not have had any new *Mario* platformers, but there's still a lot to love about the Game Boy Advance. Nick, Darran and Tim look back at the iconic handheld's impressive library of games, from those aforementioned *Mario* games to oddities like *Kuru Kuru Kururin*.

DARRAN

Name a good GBA game?

NICK

Unsurprisingly, I had some good times with *Fire Pro Wrestling*. Those games just offer so much flexibility in general, and the *WWE* games on GBA didn't come close to being as good.

TIM

Well I missed the launch of the GBA and the first time I even touched one was when I started on *Cube*, so… looking at the launch list I'm gonna go with *Army Men Advance*. I've not played it and I didn't much like the PS1/PS2 games, but hey ho.

DARRAN

You should have gone for *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* Tim, that was ace. I'm torn between *Castlevania* and *Kuru Kuru Kururin*, as I've fond memories of both. Speaking of *Castlevania*, there were three great games on the system. Did anyone else play them?

TIM

I do remember someone on *games™* playing *Kuru Kuru Kururin*, but that might have been *Kururin Squash!*. I don't get on with *Castlevania* games – it's the frequent loss of progress that bugs me.

DARRAN

You've really got to seek out those save points, Tim. What about you, Nick?

> "Fire Emblem on the GBA is what made me fall in love with the series"
> DARRAN JONES

NICK

My friend James had the original *Castlevania*, but I had to play it exclusively under his desk lamp because it was so dark. I wanted the others but didn't get to play them until the recent collection – they're really good.

DARRAN

Yup, it's a consistent trilogy of games. Let's talk strategy as there's some crackers on the GBA. Did anyone experience *Fire Emblem* or *Advance Wars* for the first time here?

NICK

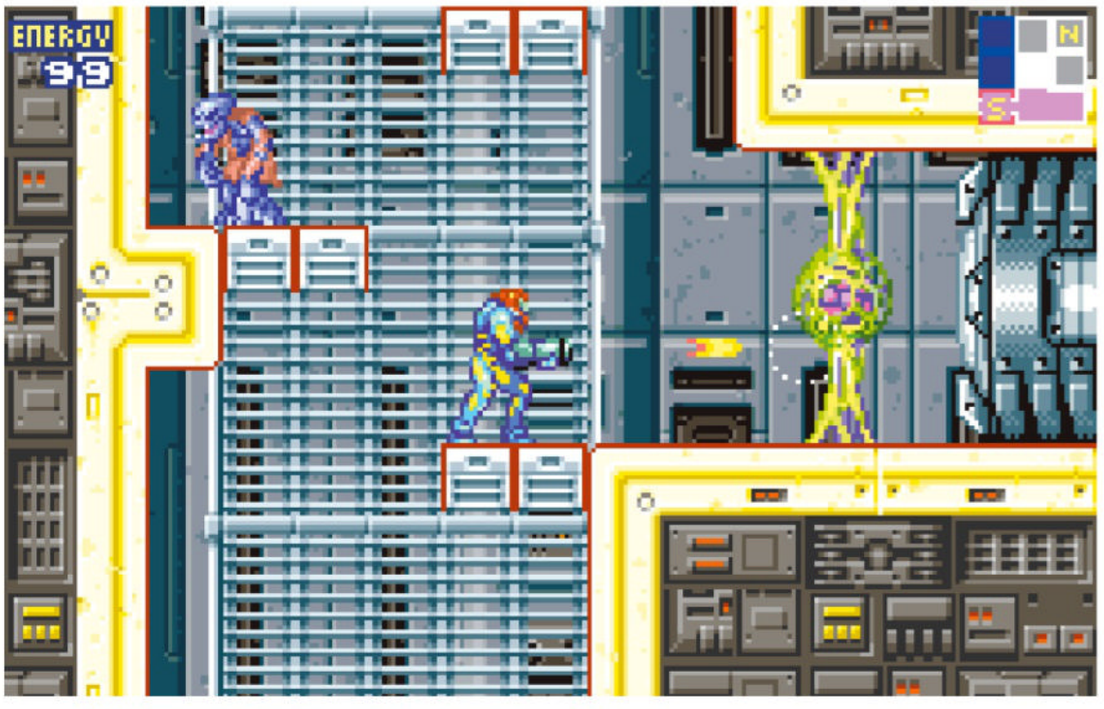
Advance Wars 2 was an obsession for a while. The cart's actually on my desk, tempting me as we speak.

TIM

Fire Emblem troubles me with its permadeath of characters, so I stay away from it. My first time with *Advance Wars* was *Dual Strike* on the DS, and that was pretty cool.

DARRAN

Fire Emblem on the GBA is what made me fall in love with the series. I have physical versions of every game since with the exception of that stupid limited edition which only included a digital code.



» [Game Boy Advance] Darran's love for the *Fire Emblem* series began here.

Does anyone have any guilty pleasures on the system?

NICK
Crash Fusion and *Spyro Fusion* are only okay games, but I think of them both fondly because I won them and a GBA SP from spong.com back in the day.

TIM
The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords, maybe not that guilty, but it was a pleasure to only give it 7 out of 10 because it was missing *Tetra's Trackers*. It caused quite a stir and one of the group editors said, "Why didn't you just say, 'It's alright if you like that kind of thing.'" And that sentence is why I wanted to get into games journalism, because I was sick of reading all these non-opinions in games mags back then.

DARRAN
I don't own it anymore because it was a little too easy, but *Action Man: Robot Atak* was fun because you could punch dinosaurs. What's everyone's thoughts on Nintendo's own output on the system?

TIM
Yoshi's Universal Gravitation felt pretty innovative, but there's lots of great stuff.

NICK
The standard of big Nintendo brand games was high, but what's surprising is that most of them were handled by other studios – *The Minish Cap* was Capcom, *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* was Intelligent Systems, and so on. *Metroid Fusion* and *WarioWare* are both excellent.

DARRAN
Yeah, I was surprised by the lack of in-house Nintendo games on the system, it seemed to be all about the *NES/Famicom Classics* series. I did like the quirkier stuff like *Boktai*, *Drill Dozer* and *WarioWare Twisted!* did anyone else experience them?

» [Game Boy Advance] Although there were no new *Mario* platformers, the likes of *Mario Kart* and *Mario Golf* were abundant on the GBA.

NICK
I actually imported the Japanese version of *Drill Dozer*. I loved the rumble feature in the cart and the way you increase the drill power with the shoulder buttons, but I've no idea about the plot to this day.

TIM
It was a dark day when *Boktai* was being reviewed on *Cube*. Whoever was reviewing it couldn't get enough sunlight!

DARRAN
I think I remember that happening, Tim. Amazingly, someone kindly donated me their *Drill Dozer* cart after seeing me cover the Game Boy Advance on my YouTube channel years ago. *WarioWare Twisted!* is great fun, but then I loved the original. Was anyone else surprised that we didn't get a proper *Mario* platformer?

NICK
I was surprised, but I guess Nintendo figured that it would be hard to top *Super Mario World* and *Yoshi's Island*. Really, what was the harm in releasing old games when most of the GBA kids were too young to remember them? Chumps and suckers, the lot of them. ✱

[Game Boy Advance] *WarioWare Twisted!* sadly never received a European release. It's now quite expensive to purchase.

» [Game Boy Advance] Hideo Kojima turned the GBA's biggest weakness into a key strength for his cult vampire-hunting game.

» [Game Boy Advance] As you'd expect, a lot of *Pokémon* games made their way onto Nintendo's console.

MORE GEMS TO SEEK OUT

Readers share their personal GBA highlights

jibber
Advance Wars 2. This game looks great, is beautifully balanced and really addictive. Once you start you just want to keep playing just to see the next amazing stage.

Game Mistress
I would have to go with *Metroid: Zero Mission* and *Metroid Fusion* for their phenomenal gameplay. I also love how *Metroid: Zero Mission* expanded on the original.

chansen
Drill Dozer was an insanely fun and replayable little gem by the same people who made *Pokémon*.

Bec-E
Tomb Raider: The Prophecy. I'm a sucker for *Tomb Raider* anyway and I was pleasantly surprised with how well this game played. It was surprisingly challenging too!

Beetz
The Hobbit. It was a time when I was obsessed with *LOTR*, and the chance to run around Middle-earth on a handheld console was just amazing.

Joseph K Garrahan
Car Battler Joe – a Mode 7 racing-themed RPG developed by Ancient. [That sounds absolutely amazing – Ed]

Azzgi
Golden Sun, because I didn't know handheld games could do that at the time.

SunnySaigon
Rhythm Tengoku – the cheerful music in this game will stick with you long after you've stopped playing!

Rocket
Dragon Ball: Advanced Adventure is an overlooked gem! One of the best *Dragon Ball* games out there.

SquidNow
Mother 3 is a goddamn masterpiece.

MrThunderwing
Ninja Cop! Hudson Soft created, Konami published awesomeness that plays like a cross between *Shinobi* and *Bionic Commando* with a very light sprinkling of *Metroid*. It's flippin' ace.

AndyKurosaki
I have fond memories of playing *Double Dragon Advance*, which I played while waiting for my flight into Japan.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

CANDY CABS

"My Candy cabs are definitely my most played arcades, I have around 25 original arcade PCBs (mostly shmups) that I switch up, as well as a couple of MiSTers that I use. I bought the 3 Egret IIs in 2016 for around £1,250 each and now they seem to sell for £2,500 plus! One of my better investments I guess, but these aren't going anywhere soon!"

£1,250 EACH

SENSIBLE SOCCER COLLECTION

"*Sensible Soccer* is the greatest football game of all time! I played it to death as a kid, so decided to try and get all the releases for all systems. The Amiga versions are still my favourite. Not many more to get."

PAID: £30

AMIGA FOREVER

Meet the collector with an impressive array of classic Amiga games and arcade cabinets

BIO

NAME:
Stephen Baker

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£75,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Amiga/Mega Drive

FAVOURITE GAME:
Sensible World Of Soccer

INSTAGRAM:
@sinisteve_retro_gamer

Although our latest collector has an impressive collection of arcade machines, his entry into collecting them was quite rough. "I got my first arcade cabinet in 2011," Stephen Baker recalls. "It was a *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* arcade that was running MAME, but the monitor died within two weeks. I drove a round trip of over 300 miles to get a replacement to then find out that there was a guy that repairs monitors 15 minutes from me."

Despite this rough start, Stephen has now amassed quite the collection, but he points out that they need a lot of love and care. "Arcades can be a pain to keep running but there are plenty of easy fixes for them. I'm lucky that I know some very clever people in the hobby that help me."

Stephen is also lucky to have a very impressive collection of big box Amiga titles. "I grew up with an Amiga, I remember going through the magazines circling the games I wanted for Christmas and birthdays," he says. "Then, around 2004, I started buying all the games I wanted to own as a kid, they were so cheap back then. The thing I really like about Amiga game collecting is that there is always something new to see, there are Amiga games I'm after that I've genuinely never seen for sale."

That hunt has led to Stephen not only sharing his collection on Instagram (search for sinisteve_retro_gamer) but also going for unique variants. "I'm currently going for the full KIXX set and am around halfway through," he admits. "I believe I have a full set of Hit Squad Amiga games, but I've never seen a confirmed list. I'm still trying to source a box for *European Champions* on the Hit Squad label, I have the disks and manual but I've never seen a box! [It was] possibly unreleased."

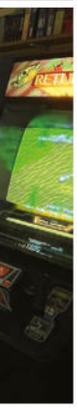
Sadly, as with collecting arcade games, picking up Amiga titles can be a tricky business due to disks often becoming corrupted. "If floppy disks have been stored badly (damp areas) then unfortunately you might run into issues," Stephen points out. "Personally I've been very lucky that I've had plenty of games that haven't booted first time, but a quick clean using vinyl cleaner soon brings them back to life."

So where does Stephen source all of his Amiga games nowadays? I still think eBay is probably the best place to go," he says. "Yes, you'll pay a premium, but I haven't seen much going on in the Facebook groups. Definitely try the retro gaming shops if they're local though, I've had some absolute bargains down the years from Ally at The Retro Hunter in Southend."

The Mega Drive is also a system Stephen collects for and he tells us he has around 450 PAL Mega Drive games, as well as a bunch of Japanese shmups, including rarities like *Eliminate Down* and *Gleylancer*. Having such big collections does cause one issue for Stephen though. "Space! I'm always after more space, as arcades take up so much room," we're told. "I've actually got four loaned to friends at the moment. Even Amiga games take up so much room compared to smaller console games. I've had to store so many things in my loft and I usually find things I forgot I had bought!"

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

VECFEVER
"I'm glad I got my hands on a few Vectrex consoles years ago before prices skyrocketed. I was very lucky to get a Vecfever cart too, as that seems to be fetching over £1,000 these days!"
PAID: £100



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

SINISTAR

■ "I love my *Sinistar* arcade cabinet (obviously where my YouTube name is influenced by) some of my earliest gaming memories involve me being scared when *Sinistar* came after you... I was only around four years old at the time. I got a great deal on this considering you don't see many in the UK! Cost me just under £2,000. It's a very tricky game to emulate as the joystick is a 49-way midway stick. Tough game though!"

PAID: JUST UNDER £2,000

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Nintendo's handheld is still relatively cheap, with original boxed copies rarely costing more than **£70.** Things become more expensive if you try tracking down variant models, particularly for the GBA SP. The *Zelda* variant can go for over **£1,500** if it's in mint condition.

CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE

Konami's second Game Boy adventure is expensive. Loose carts can hit **£70,** while boxed copies can reach **£500.** At **£45,** Limited Run Games' physical *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* is a far cheaper alternative.

FANTASIA

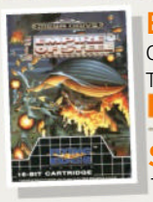
Knowledge of *Fantasia*'s mediocrity means prices aren't too high. You shouldn't have to pay more than **£15** for a complete PAL copy.

SHADOW OF ROME

Capcom's retelling of Julius Caesar's death won't slay your wallet. Complete copies are available for less than **£10.**

SLAVE ZERO

Dreamcast owners can pick *Slave Zero* up for as little as **£5,** but **£15** is more likely. It's similarly priced on PC.



EMPIRE OF STEEL

Complete PAL copies can hit **£55,** but most sell for **£35.** The Japanese edition is much more expensive and can start at **£175** in good condition.

SIMCITY 3000

There are numerous editions of Maxis' game and many are cheap. The big box edition can sell for **£15,** while other variants rarely top **£5.**

TOCA TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP

The first entry in Codemasters' racing series isn't steep as complete PAL PlayStation copies won't cost more than **£5** to acquire.

HOW MUCH?!

FATAL FURY SPECIAL

The prices of Mega-CD games continue to amaze us. A recent PAL copy of SNK's popular fighter recently sold on Buy It Now for an astonishing **£1,100,** **£1,000** more than a Japanese copy.

Prices correct at time of print

LOST IN SPACE

Nick and friends tell the tale of their unreleased GBA shoot-'em-up

I've been looking forward to writing about the Game Boy Advance for a long time, because in the dim and distant past I was actually part of a team that was making a GBA game – a shoot-'em-up called *Terra Galactica*, inspired by games like *Thunder Force IV*, *Sol-Feace* and *Silpheed*. I was just a tester and the writer of the development diary though, with the real talent found elsewhere.

The project started off in the early Noughties as a PC game built with Multimedia Fusion. "I learned my programming chops making *Sonic* fan games, and *Terra Galactica* was just this random afternoon project," says Dave Fleming. "I'll make a quick space shooter in a week, it'll be fun!" Jay Faulkner was the first person to join the project. "[Dave] posted on, I can't remember which *Sonic* forum it was, saying, 'Does anyone want to do some art for me?'" A demo of the PC version was released in the summer of 2003, and continued development through 2004.

> "I'll make a quick space shooter in a week"
> DAVE FLEMING

However, by the beginning of 2005 Dave had shifted focus to the Game Boy Advance. "I felt like it would be a little bit more pro and a little bit more interesting to develop for some kind of console," he remembers. "The GBA had a good homebrew community at the time, it was really well documented." PC Engine fan and musician Nate McLain joined the project late in 2005 via the shmups.com forum, initially getting in touch with Jay and then Dave. "Dave said, 'We do realise what you're doing is redbook audio, but we can crush the tracks into 8-bit mono wave files.' And I said, 'We'll get there when we get there. I'm just gonna start writing.'" Nate created a demo track for the training stage with the help of his friend James, and became hooked after hearing it on the hardware. "I think it was you Dave that sent me a description – I wasn't going off level design," says Nate. "It's like, 'OK, stage two, stage three,' all the way to stage eight. I got it all written in anywhere from a month to two months, then laid demos down and we just kind of kept bouncing back and forth and it was fun." The hard rock tunes were excellent, and level design worked around them. "I just think the music on the GBA version was my favourite thing about the game, we went completely bananas doing actual PCM audio," says Jay.

By the spring of 2006, the engine was largely implemented, Nate's music was playing and both training content and half of the first stage were in there. However, starting university slowed progress. "I think as development went on, after we got all the fun initial stuff done and we started getting to the grindy bits like making bosses, which took a long time, and just trying to grind out content, it became harder and harder to stay on task with those things and not get a little bit feature creepy," says Dave. Still, the soundtrack was complete by 2007 and development did continue slowly.

Terra Galactica hadn't originally been designed with the intent of a commercial release, as it felt unachievable. "You needed £10,000 just to get a dev kit, and you needed to have a proven track record of published games to even get anywhere with Nintendo," recalls Jay. There was some publisher interest, but the game would have to be ported to the DS as the GBA market was dwindling rapidly. "I remember all of our level art was very specifically tailored to the size of the GBA screen, so we'd have to redo a whole bunch of art. But we also could never figure out what the hell to do with the other screen." Ultimately, it proved to be a non-starter.

Terra Galactica was essentially abandoned after the summer of 2008, and though the idea of reviving the game elsewhere was floated later on, the team didn't feel it had the same charm outside of the handheld format. Nate did release the soundtrack in 2013, which you can listen to and buy digitally or on CD at bit.ly/TGSoundtrack And though the game was never finished, the team has now decided to make the final demo version available for the first time. You can play the training stage, two main stages and three bosses on your favourite Game Boy Advance emulator or flash cart, so give it a try and be sure to write in and let us know what you think. ✱

PLAY TERRA GALACTICA NOW!

bit.ly/PlayTerraGalactica

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

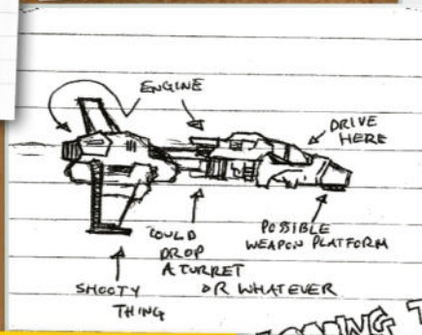
WHAT THE TERRA GALACTICA TEAM IS UP TO TODAY

DAVE FLEMING
Dave went on to sell a number of Flash games and later created the Stage3DPunk library for Flash game developers. Today, he works for MobileFuse as associate director, SDK engineering.

JAY FAULKNER
Jay went on to work on VR games, including *Zenith: The Last City*. She's currently working on her Early Access racing game *Fly Dangerous*, as well as a currently unannounced VR game.

NATE MCLAIN
As part of the MindRec team, Nate provided soundtracks and testing for various homebrew PC Engine games, and remains active in the bands Sweet Daddy and Total Death Mechanics.

THIS CONCEPT SHOWS HOW JAY WOULD SCAN A SKETCH, TIDY IT AND THEN USE PHOTOSHOP TO COLOUR THE SPRITE.



HERE'S THE ORIGINAL SKETCH OF THE BOSS THAT FOUND USE IN THE TRAINING STAGE.

[GAME BOY ADVANCE] THE DEMO ROM ENDS AT THE CITYSCAPE, THOUGH OCEAN AND JUNGLE STAGES WERE IN THE WORKS.

HERE'S A VERSION OF THE CITYSCAPE SEEN IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE SECOND STAGE.
SHIELD UP!
[GAME BOY ADVANCE] JAY REMEMBERS DEVELOPMENT BEING COMPLICATED BY A LACK OF DEBUG TOOLS AVAILABLE AT THE TIME.
[GAME BOY ADVANCE] WE WANTED THE FIRST BOSS TO MAKE AN IMPRESSION, SO IT WAS VERY BIG.
[GAME BOY ADVANCE] DAVE WENT BIG ON ROTATION EFFECTS, ON EVERYTHING FROM DOWNED ENEMIES TO ASTEROID FRAGMENTS.
TERRA GALACTICA
PRESS START BUTTON
© SHADOWSOFT GAMES 2006
[GAME BOY ADVANCE] THE TITLE SCREEN SHIP WAS BASED ON A CONCEPT BY ANOTHER FRIEND BY THE USERNAME RABID.
[GAME BOY ADVANCE] IN RETROSPECT, THE DESERT BOSS WAS VERY COOL BUT JAY THINKS IT WAS TOO HARD FOR APPEARING SO EARLY.

SHELVED SORROWS

The cancelled games readers were looking forward to

Games That Weren't
I remember seeing the System 3 game *Deadlock* previewed in *Zzap!64* back in the day and it just looked amazing. Unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Thankfully the developers dug out the prototypes, so we could finally see it in action.

Saphrone Seidel
StarCraft Ghost, I really liked the idea of a third-person game in that universe so you could see all the iconic buildings and units up close, but it just never made it to release.

Dongled
Castlevania Resurrection was the biggest cancellation disappointment for me. I'm a massive *Castlevania* fan to the point where I bought a Dreamcast just for that game alone. I was crushed when it was cancelled.

Phil Ping
The Last Ninja on Xbox. I was so keen to play it after loving the series on the C64.

MR Timson
Bioforge 2 for PC. The original was a really underrated game that deserved to get to tell more of its story. It kept on slipping back in the release schedules before being downgraded to an expansion pack and then disappearing entirely. Gutted at the time.

Andrew Hall
Not sure if this counts or not, but it's *Mire Mare* for me. I was looking forward to that after eventually completing *Underwurlde* nearly 40 years ago.

Alex Young
Probably *Operation G2* on the Amiga – especially since I won a copy in a magazine and had to be sent an alternative prize!

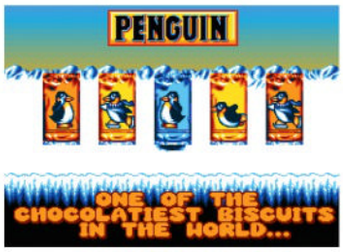
Rev Phil Richardson
Half-Life on the Dreamcast! It was basically finished and they binned it...

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of one of our classic retro books. Good luck everyone!



» [Amiga] While we know how the Penguin deal came about, we're not sure how much it was actually worth.

PENGUIN PONDERING

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I've always wondered how the McVitie's Penguin sponsorship of *James Pond II: Codename RoboCod* came about. Did McVitie's approach Electronic Arts or Millennium Interactive about interest in sponsoring a game? Or did the publisher see an opportunity and approach McVitie's?

Tim Lince

We've actually got the answer, Tim. According to our Chris Sorrell interview in RG 44 McVitie's approached the team to have its popular wrapped biscuit featured in the game. So now you know.

STAR LETTER

A COLLECTOR FOR ALL SEASONS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Have you ever done a feature that looks at the many different types of collectors? I feel it would make for a fascinating article. I used to collect retro games for many years and it's clear that there are many different ways of collecting them. Some gamers go for full collections, while others look at specific genres or a particular game series (*Castlevania* and *Mega Man* always seem popular). Some go to great lengths to track down a certain developer, while others focus on merchandise. Personally, I stopped collecting retro games as I realised it was a symptom of me being unhappy with other aspects of my life and buying games helped that, but I still collect for the Switch and I'm always fascinated to learn what pushes other gamers to amass their own impressive collections. I hope you consider my article for inclusion in the mag.

Regards,

Jacob Brown

Thanks for getting in touch, Jacob. You're right that collecting can be an interesting pastime, providing it doesn't become too consuming. We'll send you out a book to read between playing your Switch games.

» Darran is also a big Switch fan, although he still has his retro games as well.

SUPER CHALLENGE

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

When I was nine, I began religiously purchasing *N64 Magazine*. My friends and I would discuss our feelings on the scores in the playground every month – the general feeling in Year 6 was that *WCW/nWo Revenge* was underrated, for what it's worth.

One thing I distinctly remember was the leaderboard page, and particularly the *Mario Kart 64* championship that was held – the play by play of the in-person final in the office was sensational, and I distinctly recall the suspense of whether the months-long frontrunner (with his photo-only evidence of 1'02"68) would manage to produce the requisite video evidence in time to qualify for a final spot. It was good fun to keep track of, and inspired some very heated attempts among my circle of friends (unfortunately we failed to break the top 100).

As speedrunning has moved online – and largely become a solitary pursuit done under home conditions with no fixed end date – would **Retro Gamer** be open to running a similar contest for the readership in the future? I can't hope to compete against teenagers on YouTube putting in ten-hour shifts on *Tetris* or *PunchOut!!* for example, but I would love to know where I ranked among the readership with a deadline.

I also attach a photo for your amusement of the worst piece from my retro game collection – my sealed, graded copy of *Russell Grant's Astrology* for the Nintendo DS.

Best regards,

John Tucker, Caerphilly, Wales

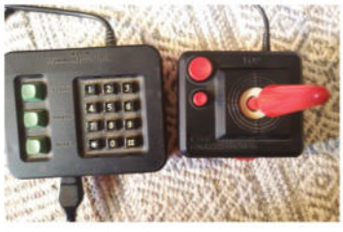
Thanks for writing in, John. Funnily enough we used to run a high-score competition in Mailbag years ago, but it never really received much interest from readers. It would be a lot harder to run a similar contest now as we all work from home, but we'll certainly talk it over.

» We were going to give away a graded copy of *Russell Grant's Astrology* as a prize, but John already has one.

WOEFUL CONTROLLERS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I have an idea for an article. The Atari 5200 is famous for its bad controllers that came packed with the system. There was a thriving market for third-party controllers that actually made the system a lot more playable. I'm attaching a photo of the best, but I also have others I could show you (and photograph more professionally, if needed). The Wico Command Control – thanks grandma – is a really good way to control the



» Claybot kindly shared photos of their Atari controllers. Do you own any?

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» [PC] If you could hear this screenshot you'd be hearing *Risky Ride*.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Dune: Part Two

While it's not the cinematic saviour that YouTube suggests, there's no denying *Dune: Part Two* is a very good film. It's so good in fact that Andy took a day off to see it and Darran has seen it twice. Nick's still not gotten around to watching *Part One* yet, while Tim only managed to get through its first hour so they'll probably hear the plot from Darran and Andy before they ever get around to seeing it.

system. It seems like fodder for an article – systems that would have been great, if not for the awful pack-in controller.

Thanks for all you do,
Claybot Uno

Many thanks for writing in and sharing your controllers with us, Claybot. We actually ran a feature about weird Atari peripherals back in RG 245 (although the controllers you mentioned didn't make the cut). We'll see if there are enough odd peripherals out there to do a follow-up article.

COOL TUNES

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

Can you possibly tell me the answer to the following? What is the best single level musical theme from a retro game? For me, *Mystic Cave Zone* in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is undefeated.

Regards,
Matt Tuck

A quick question deserves a quick answer, Mat. Darran loves *Risky Ride* from *OutRun 2,* Nick enjoys *Back To The Industry* and *Expander* from Stage 7 of Streets Of Rage 2, while Tim loves *Yoshimitsu's Theme* from *Tekken Tag Tournament*.

» [PS4] As you'd expect, *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* remains very popular with readers.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Castlevania game?

Nick Westwood
Rondo Of Blood. When I first played it on the Wii's Virtual Console I felt like I'd experienced the ultimate expression of what *Castlevania* was meant to be. An unbelievably good soundtrack, amazing graphics, varied levels, and challenging gameplay! It's perfect! Years later I finally got it on the PC Engine!

Goofball Grappler
Circle Of The Moon. I love Nathan Graves, the DSS System, and the whip as a primary weapon while still keeping the open format.

Christian
For Metroidvania style it's *Symphony Of The Night.* For classic style it's *Dracula's Curse* (maybe the best game on the NES).

Joel J Games
Symphony Of The Night, closely followed by *Aria Of Sorrow.*

Robert August de Meijer
Order Of Ecclesia has the best weapons, level design, bosses and challenge.

Nicholas John Pozega
Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge for Game Boy! Stunning presentation, a killer soundtrack, and the great *Castlevania* gameplay in portable form. It was such a huge step up from *Castlevania: The Adventure* too! I also loved that you could select which stage to play a la *Mega Man*!

DoomBlogMan
I'm currently revisiting the GBA games on my old DS Lite. *Circle Of The Moon* is definitely a favourite!

Lee Jackson
Symphony Of The Night. Replayed it a while back and it still holds up. It's crazy how much replay value it offers with all of its item combinations, areas to explore, and additional characters. Then you throw in the well-crafted sprite work and soundtrack 'chef's kiss'.

Georg
Castlevania: Dracula X on the SNES… even though it's considered a downgrade from *Rondo Of Blood*… both are fantastic.

Beil3
The one with the huge, huge, HUGE swinging chandeliers.

AndyKurosaki
Super Castlevania IV. From its satisfying combat and memorable levels, to its bosses and outstanding soundtrack, it's a timeless classic.

retro GAMER

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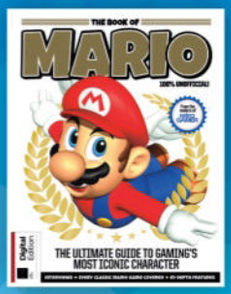

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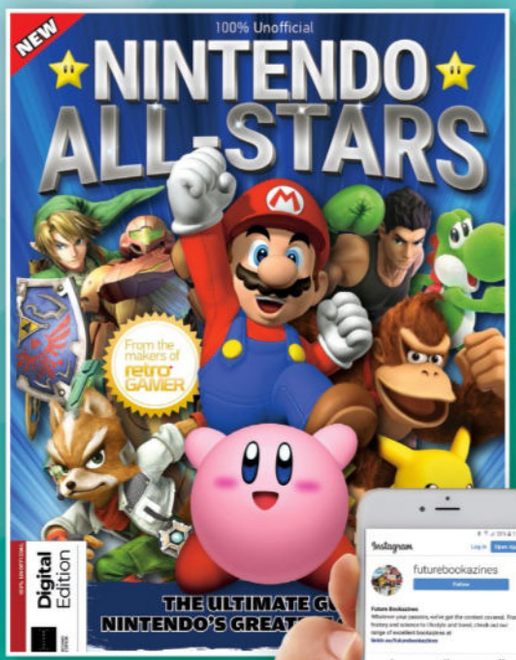

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Pursuit Force

CRIME AND EXCESSIVE PUNISHMENT

» PSP » 2005 » BIGBIG STUDIOS

***Pursuit Force* was one of the very first games I got for my PSP, and it was exactly the kind of game I wanted from my new console.** Essentially, the game is an updated spin on the old *Chase HQ* formula, in which you pursue criminals and ram them off the road – or maybe leap out of your car, shoot them in the face and carry on with their vehicle. It was made exclusively for the PSP, it took full advantage of the console's 3D graphics power and had an awesome orchestral soundtrack by Richard Jacques. What's not to love?

Well, there are a couple of things and I'd been warned about both by reviews. Firstly the on-foot sections control rather awkwardly, which is at least in part due to the PSP's lack of a second analogue slider. Secondly and rather more importantly, the difficulty level is brutal. I'm not the kind of gamer to lose my temper badly – I've certainly let out a few expletives in my time, but I've never been the sort of guy to chuck a controller, so I thought I could handle it. Nope. I never cracked, but the difficulty in *Pursuit Force* had me fantasising about taking my expensive, brand-new handheld in both hands and violently smashing it across my knee.

Between that difficulty, the demands of university and the allure of other games, I never finished *Pursuit Force*. I've often thought about going back and tackling it again though, and revisiting the sequel recently has tempted me anew – there's nothing quite like triggering slow motion as you jump towards an enemy vehicle, shooting gangsters in a glorious display of mid-air marksmanship. However, I think I might opt for the North American release because that one at least has some checkpoints to mitigate some of the worst issues. I might not be afraid of a challenge, but even I have my limits.

ENDGAME

CAPTAIN QUAZAR

» What do you need when the galaxy is in trouble? You need a strong and heroic man dressed in red and blue spandex – and since Superman is booked with the Justice League this week, his police-approved substitute Captain Quazar will have to do. He doesn't have super powers but he does have a big gun, and sometimes that's all you really need.

01

» You know how it goes with police chiefs – they're always stressed because the mayor won't leave their donkey alone. That's true even for intergalactic police, like the force Captain Quazar works with.

02

» Today, however, the chief is in a good mood after a success. "Congratulations Quazar, you've saved the galaxy," he says. "Now you can take some time off to address the situation with your chin."

03

» "Sir, I don't understand," replies Captain Quazar. "Gods, Quazar, have you looked in a mirror lately? Your chin juts out so far from the rest of your face, you could land a space freighter on it! Get some help, man."

04

» "Well sir, since we're being honest with one another, it looks like you had your head squeezed as a baby and never recovered," Quazar retorts. "Oh, you're making fun of my hourglass-shaped head? Well, that's exactly what happened. Now get out of my office and don't come back," the chief yells.

05

» We cut to a scene outside the intergalactic police station as the yelling continues and the credits start to roll, sitcom style. Inevitably there will be another crisis next week, Captain Quazar will return and he'll argue with the chief about the odd cartoon proportions of their Nineties CGI heads.

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